

# Phenomenology of Humans and Food in *Jabutan Opak* Tradition in Tegalweru Village – Indonesia

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**Abstract.** *Jabutan Opak* tradition is the biggest festival held every three years in Tegalweru, Dau, Indonesia. This tradition has several distinct features. There is various uniqueness in this tradition. Behind the exoticism of the tradition, there are two important phenomenological aspects, namely participant meaning, and holistic account. In the present study, the data were collected through recording phenomena and interviewing actors. The phenomenological analysis used to obtain the research results revealed that the actors of the *Jabutan Opak* tradition created intersubjective value, equality, and spirituality through their interactions with others and the processing of food around them.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology, food, *Jabutan opak*, tradition, society heritage

## 1 Introduction

Tradition is a cultural process that takes place from time to time and is inherited through the process of passing down knowledge. The tradition belongs to every civilization, whether it still exists or disappears. A tradition as cultural heritage [1] has a background that affects its emergence and the process of its inheritance. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between humans and food in the *Jabutan Opak* Tradition series in Tegalweru, Dau, Indonesia, known as *Jabutan Opak* in the modern era. This study was expected to support further research on the meaning of intangible culture in Tegalweru, in particular, and material culture in other areas, in general. *Jabutan Opak* is a festival tradition followed by all residents in an area. At least in 2022, only Dau District is recorded to have this tradition, and not even all villages carry out the tradition. Only the villages of Selorejo and Tegalweru preserve the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. The present study was conducted in Tegalweru.

Several criteria in this study were chosen to examine the meanings that arise in the community through phenomenological analysis of the *Jabutan Opak* phenomenon during the effects of modernity. The actors, both residents, and directors of the *Jabutan Opak* tradition have their own knowledge of the reasons and meaning of the tradition. This gives rise to experiences that are both external and internal for traditional practitioners in Tegalweru. In the implementation

of this tradition, there is an intersubjective relationship between the actors of the tradition and between the actors and metaphysical aspects such as nature and ancestral spirits. This makes *Jabutan Opak* qualify as an object of inter-subjective phenomenological analysis.

## **2 Method**

The research was carried out in Tegalweru Village, Dau District, Indonesia, especially in several houses of residents who were the actors and directors of the implementation of *Jabutan Opak*. This research was conducted in May-July 2022. The data collection method in this study was an interview method that involved the experience, knowledge, and beliefs of traditional actors consisting of representatives of women and men, elders (*kamituo*), and Tegalweru Village officials. The data from interview was obtained from a story told by Tegalweru resident about a past event, most often a recent one. The result of interview recording was then analyzed theoretically. The analytical point of view is a qualitative phenomenological method that involves two aspects, namely the participant's meaning (resident's meaning) or the meaning of the actors and a holistic account or overall view of the implementation of the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. A phenomenological approach can be used to explore the functional meaning of a phenomenon in front of an object. It was used to discover the meanings derived from the research object [2].

## **3 Results**

### **3.1 *Jabutan Opak* Tradition**

The *Jabutan Opak* tradition is held every three years and begins with determining the date of implementation according to the Javanese Islamic calendar called *Aboge* (Alif-Rebo-Wage). Tegalweru villagers believe that this calendar was compiled by Sunan Kalijaga and then inherited by Javanese Muslim students, allowing the legacy of knowledge to spread throughout Java and even Indonesia. The date setters, hereinafter referred to "elders" (*kamituo*) are residents of Tegalweru who are tasked with directing and delivering prayers at the *Jabutan Opak* procession. After an agreed-upon date for the implementation of *Jabutan Opak*, the male residents gathered in one of the residents' houses (or sometimes at the village hall) to discuss the division of tasks for the implementation of *Jabutan Opak*. Based on interviews with residents, each of the smallest village units, commonly known as *Rukun Tetangga* (RT) usually consists of 10-15 heads of family. Each RT has a task to make a set (Opak mountains). Tegalweru Village itself consists of 8 RTs who will participate in the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. The reason why phenomenology was proposed in this study was because the experience of the people of Tegalweru with their artificial Opak was clearer than some other research objects, such as the originality of food or the ontology of the community's activities. Originality is not important for the people of Tegalweru because they are people who have lived in the village for at least four generations. The majority of people arrive no later than that. This causes acculturation to become commonplace because the people of Tegalweru are the same as various other communities that have experienced acculturation. They absorb while filtering, selecting and managing the influences of foreign cultures that

enter. Thus, what happens can cause one culture to disappear or even undergo a transformation, creating a unique culture which is different from other regions [3].

*Jabutan Opak* itself is a tradition that the residents have believed and practiced for more than 80 years. According to interviews with several residents aged 50-60, *Jabutan Opak* has been a tradition in their village for at least 3 generations. *Jabutan Opak* itself is a folk festival, consisting of a series of events; community meetings, cooking preparations, the construction of Opak sets, mass parades, prayer readings in two places (village water sources and the right to eat Opak together), and a procession of fighting for blessings by consuming the set. Opak that has been made. Indonesian food culture itself is shaped by several factors such as nature, history, and culture [4]. Villagers interpret *Jabutan Opak* as a celebration of gratitude typical of Tegalweru, where each unit of residents arranges various types of food in one large container and, at a predetermined time, all villagers may consume the entire set of Opak collected. People in Tegalweru also said that *Jabutan* itself is a word from the Javanese language, which means to take something stuck or to pull it out. While Opak itself is a type of food that is identical to the type of snack that is shaped like a flat circle. It is crispy and thin. Opak, which is frequently found in the Indonesian market is a flat snack with several colors and flavors. Each region in Indonesia has its own definition of “Opak”. Likewise with the residents of Tegalweru. According to them, Opak is cassava chips they made by themselves based on a simple recipe inherited from their ancestors. Opak as it is known by the residents of Tegalweru is commonly known by another name, namely *samiler* or *miler*. In some cases, Opak does not have to be made from cassava and can instead be made from another type of flour. As long as the food is circular, thin, and crunchy, the people of Tegalweru call it Opak.

### 3.2 Making Opak *Gunungan*

*Gunungan* Opak requires a complex division of labor, especially for men and women who have learned how to cook different types of food and make Opak sets. The Opak set is a building with various types of food arranged on a wooden plank as high as 1.5-2 meters with a diameter of approximately 2 meters. The Opak set itself is named Opak because Opak food is the “star” in the unity of these various types of food. The food in the Opak set is usually a combination of home-cooked food and snacks commonly consumed by the people of Tegalweru. Only in the last two decades, have Opak sets had more variants because people also include small snacks produced by the factory.

Some of food found in an Opak set include: white rice balls, boiled vegetables, spicy fried coconut (*Urap*), stir-fried long beans, and various side dishes served such as satay and *capitan* (served between a piece of bamboo that is split into pieces). two), seasoned tempeh, fried tempeh, seasoned tofu, grilled tofu, fried milkfish, salted fish, fried boiling (frozen cow blood), tempeh *mendoan*, sliced cucumber, crackers, Opak, and one whole seasoned chicken. As a decoration, residents used to add various types of fruit, snacks, and fresh vegetables. Each menu on the skewers of satay and *capitan* amounts to eight pieces, and all menus outside of rice and fruit are inserted into a *debog* or banana tree trunk. This is what causes this tradition to be called *Jabutan*. From various interviews, none of the residents could figure out the reason the total number of side dishes had to be eight and why Opak should be an obligatory part of the diet.

Furthermore, the prayer procession is carried out first by giving both at the location of the shared meal and the village water source. This offering has the same standards as other offerings on the island of Java, including coffee, cigarettes, five kinds of flowers (rose, ylang, jasmine, white and yellow cempaka), incense, red and white *jenang* (sweet and sticky snacks), and burning incense, as well as some food that can be provided by the residents in a bamboo plate with a diameter of approximately 40-60 cm. The prayers in these two places were led by traditional village elders, and the prayers were addressed to several parties. The first party is Allah, or God Almighty, then followed by the Prophet Muhammad and his guardians, who have contributed to spreading Islam in Indonesia. Furthermore, prayer is also aimed at nature, which has provided shade and blessings for daily life. The last one is for the local spirit who guards the area, or what is commonly known as Dhanyangan. It refers to the spirits of the early ancestors who inhabit the village and protect the village from dangers such as disease and drought. This is not strange considering that Javanese people like pilgrimages, and respect for ancestors, leaders, and sacred people [5]. Prayers of thanksgiving to God and other protective agents who are God's creations are part of almost all traditions in Java and throughout Indonesia. Prayers of gratitude in the Opak *Jabutan* process consist of two languages, namely Arabic and Javanese. This acculturation is also commonly found in various rural areas, especially in the islands of Indonesia, which still have very strong traditions.

The Opak procession is carried out in the morning around 3-4 p.m. with a crowd. The village men take turns carrying the Opak mountains to be paraded around the village, and the journey ends at the Tegalweru village hall. After all the Opak sets are ready, the residents gather, and the prayer procession is carried out. After a series of opening speeches and prayers were completed, residents were asked to take Opak (by pulling side dishes) and eat it together. Everyone who comes, even if they are not the residents of Tegalweru, is required to take and eat some of the food from the available Opak set. Usually, this *Jabutan* procession is a busy one because residents often enjoy the process of fighting over the desired menu. It is not uncommon for someone to take the opportunity to pull out, thus many side dishes that they scold each other, or small fights occur. The elders frequently expressed regret, but *Jabutan Opak* persisted until the residents gradually returned home after eating. Another point of contention is that this process is often carried out in groups or in fights, resulting in a lot of food being wasted. The problems of fighting over and wasting food is still a problem that needs to be criticized, not only in Tegalweru but in all forms of tradition that involve the mass distribution of food at the same time. However, because this research seeks to see the relationship between humans and the relationship between humans and the world outside themselves, this problem needs to be temporarily put aside.

## **4 Discussion**

### **4.1 Participant's Meaning**

Through extracting the data above, several interesting findings showed the formation of subjective and intersubjective values both between humans and between humans and their

world through the *Jabutan Opak* procession. The first was cooperation and eating together which was an important point for the people of Tegalweru in the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. All residents and respondents who had been interviewed agreed that in the *Jabutan Opak* tradition, the aesthetic value of the Opak set or the taste of the prepared dishes was secondary. The most important thing for them is that, through the *Jabutan Opak* tradition they had time to work together to make something happen, which was then spent together. In this tradition, there was a collective spirit, where anyone learned or tried to do anything to realize the *Jabutan Opak* procession. Apart from the elders who did have the special task of finding the right date and delivering prayers, everyone had the same role in working together. Collaboration and dining together in *Jabutan Opak* represent a face-to-face meeting room; men, women, youth, and old people meet in the same space to realize value, and express gratitude for life in their village.

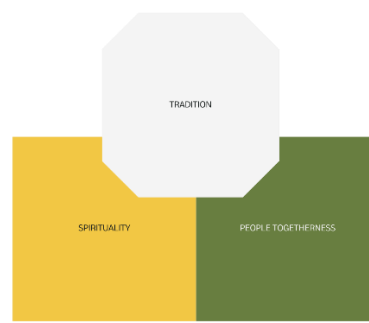
The second finding was the meaning of the circle shape of Opak, which turned out to have no standard meaning. However, for the residents, Opak has its own interpretation, for example, a circle as a symbol of community unity, a circle as a symbol of the integrity of life, a circle as the perfection of life, and even a circle as a symbol of the simplicity of farmers and workers. The people of Tegalweru did not worry about the meaning that must be remembered for the circle shape, but they gave birth to their own meaning, which encouraged them to continue to preserve this tradition. Similar to the Opak form, the meaning of the Opak set form also underwent the same process where the amount and type of food taught by their grandfather was interpreted separately so that it created a sense of gratitude and joy that was closer to them, more original. One of the reasons why the Opak series was in such great demand, even making villagers and guests fight for it, was because there are similarities in the symbols of values in the community, so that they feel the taste and smell better than people who do not understand the value built by food symbols (in this case: Opak) [6].

*Jabutan Opak* also provided an opportunity to introduce several types of food that millennial Tegalweru people are not familiar with. As can be seen, Tegalweru is one of the villages on the outskirts of Malang City and Batu City where many of the youth choose to work as employees, while their parents still prefer to work in agriculture. This is one of the characteristics of developing rural areas on the island of Java. Due to the condition of youth in such a way, verification is decreasing, especially when combined with many foreign specialties they are familiar with, or the onslaught of the fast-food industry, which reduces food diversification. This is equivalent to the result of the previous research which stated that the diversity of food over time in a household decrease. This decline in food diversity was largely driven by a decrease in the consumption of nutritious food groups (e.g., fruits, vegetables, nuts, and fish) [7]. Because of that, the elders and people who respect *Jabutan Opak* are optimistic that with the implementation of the *Jabutan Opak* tradition, the younger generation of Tegalweru can still know the types of food that people used to eat in ancient times. In addition, *Jabutan Opak* is also expected to support the tastes or menu preferences of the youth in the local cuisine of the village.

#### **4.2 Holistic Account**

Through extracting the data above, two universal points can be found that can be drawn from the phenomena and experiences of the actors in the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. *Jabutan Opak* is

one of the activities the residents in addition to religious celebrations, Indonesian Independence Day, and competitions between villages. Tegalweru Village has a dynamic social life because its residents can interpret togetherness not only as daily life but also in the formation of a common identity, namely the 'Residents of Tegalweru' through the uniqueness of *Jabutan Opak*. This is because every festival has its own uniqueness and characteristics [8]. Human social life can be understood as what makes life meaningful. That is why all aspects of social life can be understood in a phenomenological sense as part of a living system. Aspects such as culture, social contracts, customs, or value building are important to study because by understanding these aspects, humans can be understood in terms of their preferred preferences. The social system arranged in such a way as from the *Jabutan Opak* festival is part of the formation of the Tegalweru community's self-reference. This is in line with the previous study which argued that human sociality is actualized in a contingent social system [9].



**Fig. 1.** Relations build by Tegalweru people in *Jabutan Opak* Tradition.

In this study, the *Jabutan Opak* festival became a social system that occurred temporally and periodically, where there was a communicative phenomenon that resulted in self-organization (autopoiesis) in a society [9]. Cooking, arranging food, and even fighting over food are commonly seen as activities that are synonymous with women. Without trying to accept this labeling as absolute and correct, the people of Tegalweru agree that cooking activities are indeed identical to women's activities. However, during the preparation of *Jabutan Opak*, many activities, such as preparing food, making food arrangements, decorating food, and even participating in the process of fighting over food became almost entirely male activities.

There is no intention to eliminate the role of women in these processes; rather, each man in a household is required by tradition to play a role in making and preparing the food as a representative of the head of the family. The creation of resources is purely as an attitude to respect the femininity of culture. This is in line with previous research, in which one of the characteristics of the Indonesian people who glorify taste is marked by the exploration of the reality of femininity [10]. At this stage, both men and women are in the same position to explore roles, feelings, and value creation for agricultural products as well as gratitude through the *Jabutan Opak* tradition. In this tradition, the role of the community in togetherness and the value of the spirituality were one and the same for the Tegalweru residence. In short, *Jabutan Opak* encourages the process of interpreting the social aspects of each actor.

The second universal point was spirituality, in which the prayer for the meal together became a missed event because they could hear the elders talk about messages that needed to be remembered for the next 3 years. In addition, in this tradition, there was an understanding of mystical experience as a universal connectedness [11] in which the natural product integrated with work to create Opak became the embodiment of a prayer of gratitude as well as a missed community activity. Both Dhanyang, the saints, the Prophet Muhammad, and their physical natures are valued as God's creations who will accompany, guide, and protect residents in different portions according to their respective beliefs. With the preparation of the Opak set, which is almost entirely made of natural ingredients, the spirit of *memayu hayuningbawana*, or the character of actions that always maintain, strive for and create prosperity and safety [12] is present in the awareness of the people of Tegalweru. They enjoyed the process of making the Opak set which was beautiful but simple compared to when they lived in the village with their family.

The *Jabutan Opak* tradition did not only offer Opak but also various types of food that were meaningful to the people of Tegalweru. The various available menu were not independent, but the diversity of various types of natural resources that had been accessible to the people of Tegalweru so far. Therefore, it becomes important to understand how a food recipe comes together. The importance of food in understanding cultural phenomena lies in its infinite variability [13]. The allegation that the Tegalweru people created the Opak recipe through the knowledge of their ancestors supported by a phenomenology that was structured in two processes. The first process was the creation of meaning from the preparation of food recipes, and the second was the acceptance of the recipe's heritage through hereditary traditions. This was strengthened by the gathering of knowledge through the process of inheriting recipes, where the people of Tegalweru currently accepted the presence of their ancestors when they cooked and arranged Opak, until the celebration of *Jabutan Opak*. Both processes are cultural in nature, with the essence of gratitude, enjoyment, and unity with ancestors and others, constituting an essential series of unity.

A series of responses from a culture can be considered essential, following a phenomenological picture of perceived action, namely actions that appear in human consciousness (image praxis). The praxis image is rooted in a certain culture, the meaning obtained through the process of cooking and arranging Opak is an image of human culture (anthropic image) which is the essential meaning of a series of actions that describe a form of life. Thus, it can be concluded that the phenomenological image has been invested with meaning (cultural symbolic) [14]. This phenomenon then formed an identity so that Opak and *Jabutan Opak* needed to be respected as the creation of human value in their world. In short, the second holistic value found in this tradition was the close relationship between humans, nature, spirituality, and food processing.

## 5 Conclusion

The *Jabutan Opak* tradition is both an activity and a space where the people of Tegalweru create, not only an activity festival but also intersubjective values and relationships. The first relationship is the one between humans and other humans, built in cooperation and eating together. While the second relationship is the one between humans and their environment, built in the procession of preparing Opak sets until their introduction to each menu served. In this tradition also appear two universal values, namely the creation of the value of equality and spirituality through their encounters with others and the natural wealth around them. The meaning of the community has not diminished even though the villagers have accepted a lot of modern customs. The *Jabutan Opak* tradition is one of the thousands of traditions that connect natural wealth, food processing, and society. However, from the phenomenon of this tradition, there was an interesting leap where the residents were not too concerned with the values, born in the history of the birth of this tradition, but they were more concerned with the new values, born from their direct experience in the tradition.

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