

The Mantu Bubak Tradition in Javanese Marriage Rituals from the Perspective of Soren Kierkegaard's Existentialism

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine community perspectives on the mantu bubak tradition in Sumberjo Village, Margomulyo District, Bojonegoro Regency, and to analyze the forms of human existence embodied in this tradition through the lens of Soren Kierkegaard's existentialist philosophy. The research employs a qualitative approach with a fieldwork-based design. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, religious figures, and families involved in the practice of the tradition, as well as documentation. The data were subsequently analyzed using descriptive, hermeneutic, and interpretative approaches. The findings indicate that the majority of the community continues to perceive mantu bubak as a socially and culturally functional tradition, as it strengthens family ties, social solidarity, and mutual cooperation amid processes of modernization. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, this tradition represents the aesthetic, ethical, and religious stages of existence. Accordingly, mantu bubak can be understood as an existential expression of Javanese society in interpreting marriage not merely as a social event, but also as a moral and spiritual experience.

Keywords : *Javanese Culture; Mantu Bubak Tradition; Existentialism; Soren Kierkegaard.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengkaji pandangan masyarakat terhadap tradisi mantu bubak di Desa Sumberjo, Kecamatan Margomulyo, Kabupaten Bojonegoro, serta menganalisis bentuk-bentuk eksistensi manusia dalam tradisi tersebut melalui perspektif eksistensialisme Soren Kierkegaard. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain penelitian lapangan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam dengan tokoh adat, tokoh agama, dan keluarga pelaksana tradisi, serta dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis

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menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif, hermeneutik, dan interpretatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mayoritas masyarakat masih memandang mantu bubak sebagai tradisi yang fungsional secara sosial dan kultural karena memperkuat ikatan keluarga, solidaritas, dan gotong royong di tengah modernisasi. Dalam perspektif Kierkegaard, tradisi ini merepresentasikan tahap estetis, etis, dan religius, sehingga mantu bubak dapat dipahami sebagai ekspresi eksistensial masyarakat Jawa dalam memaknai pernikahan sebagai pengalaman sosial, moral, dan spiritual.

Keyword : Javanese Culture; Mantu Bubak Tradition; Existentialism; Soren Kierkegaard.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. Background

Indonesia is an archipelagic country characterized by an exceptionally high degree of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. This plurality is clearly reflected in the wide variation of marriage customs practiced across different regions, including within Javanese society.¹ From the perspective of religious norms and state law, marriage in Indonesia is regulated by Law Number 1 of 1974 on Marriage, which defines marriage as an inner and outer bond between a man and a woman aimed at establishing a happy and enduring family based on the belief in the One and Only God. In Islamic jurisprudence, marriage is understood as a contractual agreement that legitimizes the relationship between husband and wife, while simultaneously functioning as a means to preserve lineage and maintain social order.²

In Javanese culture, marriage is not merely understood as a legal contract or an emotional relationship between two individuals, but also as a cultural event that involves the extended family and the wider social community, imbued with symbols, rituals, and sacred values.³ A series of

¹ Purwadi, *Upacara Tradisional Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005). 167-168; Ibnu Ismail, *Islam Tradisi Komperatif Budaya Jawa Dengan Tradisi Islam* (Kediri: Tretes Publishing, 2011).

² Tihami Shohari S, *Fiqih Munnakabat Kajian Fiqih Lengkap* (Jakarta: Raja Grafindo Persada, 2009). 6.

³ Purwadi, *Upacara Tradisional Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005).

ceremonial practices such as *siraman*, *midodareni*, and *pingitan* underscores the positioning of marriage as an existential transitional moment that requires careful spiritual, social, and cultural management. One tradition that continues to be preserved within this cultural framework is *mantu bubak*, as practiced in Sumberjo Village, Margomulyo District, Bojonegoro Regency. This tradition is performed when parents marry off their first child and is often equated with the term *bubak kawah*, which etymologically means “opening the way” for the subsequent marriages of other children within the family.⁴

Numerous previous studies have examined the *bubak* tradition from the perspectives of *’urf*, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), sociology, and functionalism. Within these studies, the *bubakan* tradition is generally understood as a rational form of cultural heritage that does not contain elements of *shirk*.⁵ Jarwanto distinguishes *bubak* practices into categories of *’urf ṣāḥiḥ* and *’urf fāsiḍ*,⁶ depending on the beliefs and meanings attached to the ritual, while Anggraini emphasizes that the tradition persists because it fulfills important social, psychological, and biological functions within the community. Rawuh likewise identifies a spectrum of views among Islamic scholars regarding the *bubakan* tradition, concluding that it is fundamentally acceptable as long as it does not contradict the essential pillars (*rukun*) of marriage.⁷

Nevertheless, the existential dimension of local traditions from a philosophical perspective, particularly that of existentialism, has received relatively limited scholarly attention. Several studies, such as Jebar et al.’s

⁴ Artati Agoes, *Kiat Sukses Menyelenggarakan Pesta Perkawinan Adat Jawa* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka, 2001).

⁵ Anwar, Chairi. *Pandangan Masyarakat terhadap Tradisi Bubakan pada Walimatur ’Ury (Studi Kasus di Desa Bendosari, Kecamatan Pujon, Kabupaten Malang)*. Undergraduate thesis, Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, 2014.

⁶ Jarwanto, Angga Amario. “Tinjauan ’Urf terhadap Praktik Ritus Bubak di Desa Semanding, Kecamatan Jenangan, Kabupaten Ponorogo”. Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ponorogo, 2021.

⁷ Sugeng Rawuh, “Ragam Pandangan Tokoh Islam Terhadap Tradisi Bubakan Dalam Perkawinan Adat Jawa Di Desa Sendang Kecamatan Jambon Kabupaten Ponorogo” Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ponorogo, 2018.

analysis of the *cear cumpe* tradition, demonstrate that customary rituals can be interpreted as expressions of human existence, both individually and collectively.⁸ In Western philosophy, Søren Kierkegaard is widely regarded as a pioneer of existentialism, emphasizing subjective experience, freedom of choice, personal responsibility, and the individual's personal relationship with God.⁹ Kierkegaard conceptualizes the human existential journey in three stages, namely the aesthetic, ethical, and religious, which represent the dynamic ways in which human beings interpret life through sensory experience, moral commitment, and transcendental orientation.¹⁰

This framework is relevant for interpreting the *mantu bubak* practice as an existential experience that is not merely cultural in nature, but also imbued with profound ethical and religious meanings. Accordingly, this study seeks to address an existing research gap by offering a philosophical reading of Javanese marriage traditions through the lens of Kierkegaardian existentialism, while simultaneously contributing to the development of socio-religious philosophical studies in the Indonesian context.

2. Problem Formulation

Based on this background, the present study is formulated to examine how the community of Sumberjo Village, Margomulyo District, Bojonegoro Regency perceives the *mantu bubak* tradition, as well as to analyze the forms of human existence represented in this tradition when viewed through the philosophical perspective of Soren Kierkegaard's existentialism.

⁸ Sirilus Jebar, Armada Riyanto, and Mathias Jebaru Adon, "Tradisi Cear Cumpe Di Kampung Runtu: Ekspresi Eksistensi Manusia Menurut Soren Kierkegaard," *Jurnal Adat Dan Budaya Indonesia* 6, no. 1 (2024): h.76–86.

⁹ F. Budi Hardiman. *Filsafat Modern: Dari Machiavel Sampai Nietzsche*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Media, 2007; Harun Hadiwijono, *Seri Sejarah Filsafat Barat 2* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1980).

¹⁰ Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle*, *Translate by Alexander Dru* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962).

3. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with a field research design. The research was conducted in Sumberjo Village, Margomulyo District, Bojonegoro Regency, which administratively consists of several hamlets, with the majority of the population being Muslim and largely dependent on agriculture and informal-sector occupations. Primary data sources include traditional leaders (*pujonggo*) who lead the implementation of the *mantu bubak* tradition, religious leaders and local community figures, as well as families who performed the *mantu bubak* ritual when marrying off their first child. Secondary data were obtained from relevant literature, such as undergraduate theses, master's theses, journal articles, and books discussing the *bubak* tradition, Javanese wedding customs, Kierkegaard's existentialist thought, and religious guidelines on marriage.

Data were collected through participant observation by directly observing the implementation of the *mantu bubak* tradition in several families, in-depth interviews with traditional leaders, religious figures, and parents marrying off their first child to explore the history, meanings, and both supportive and critical views of the tradition along with their religious arguments, as well as documentation in the form of photographs of ritual processions, field notes, village demographic data, and other supporting documents. Data analysis was conducted in three stages: phenomenological description of the *mantu bubak* practices as observed in the field, hermeneutic analysis of the symbolic meanings of ritual objects (*uborampe*), narratives of traditional leaders, and local texts, and philosophical interpretation by mapping the research findings onto the framework of Kierkegaard's existentialism, particularly its three stages of existence.

B. DISCUSSIONS

1. Community Perspectives on the Mantu Bubak Tradition

In general, the people of Sumberjo Village perceive the *mantu bubak* tradition as an important cultural practice imbued with sacred value and therefore worthy of continued preservation. The majority of

informants, particularly parents and traditional leaders, understand *mantu bubak* as an expression of gratitude to God for being granted the ability to marry off their first child, as well as a medium of prayer for the newly established marriage to be endowed with sustenance, safety, and domestic harmony. This interpretation is reinforced by informants' statements emphasizing that the tradition is performed as an act of obedience to ancestral heritage (*nurut wong tuwo*) and is intentionally framed as a form of *keslametan* (ritual thanksgiving and protection) for the family.¹¹

Beyond being understood as a religious expression, *mantu bubak* is also perceived as a symbolic act of "opening the way" for the marriages of subsequent children. In the view of some community members, the proper performance of this tradition is believed to facilitate sustenance and protect the family from future difficulties, whereas neglecting it is thought to potentially invite misfortune or obstacles. Such perceptions indicate the presence of symbolic beliefs that position the tradition as a significant factor in regulating the flow of fortune and family destiny. These beliefs operate not merely as individual convictions, but as collectively shared knowledge transmitted intergenerationally within the community.

From a social perspective, *mantu bubak* serves a strong integrative function within the community. Ritual sequences such as *slametan udukan*, the public opening of the *daringan kebak*, and communal meals play a significant role in strengthening social bonds, reinforcing solidarity, and reproducing the value of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). The active involvement of neighbors, relatives, and traditional leaders positions this tradition as a mechanism for reinforcing Javanese cultural identity amid the pressures of modernization and social change.¹² Nevertheless, this study also identifies critical perspectives, particularly among certain religious figures and educated community members. This group questions beliefs that directly associate the neglect of *mantu bubak* with

¹¹ Hasil wawancara dengan SN dan K pada 12 Juni 2024.

¹² Anggraini "Kelestarian Tradisi Bubak Manten dalam Upacara Pernikahan Masyarakat Islam". Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ponorogo, 2019.

the occurrence of misfortune, viewing such assumptions as potentially approaching *tathayyur* or excessive reliance on factors other than God. From their standpoint, the tradition may continue to be preserved as a cultural expression insofar as it is not regarded as a determinant of the validity of marriage or upheld as a belief that contradicts the principle of *tawhīd*.¹³ Sociologically, therefore, Desa Sumberjo demonstrates a dynamic dialectic between the preservation of tradition and processes of religious reinterpretation, in which *mantu bubak* endures due to its strong social and cultural functions while simultaneously undergoing meaningful reinterpretation within a more reflective religious framework.

2. The *Mantu Bubak* Tradition as an Expression of Human Existence

Field findings indicate that the *mantu bubak* tradition embodies existential values that can be interpreted through Søren Kierkegaard's three stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. At the aesthetic stage, *mantu bubak* is understood as a celebratory event that emphasizes sensory experience, symbolic beauty, and social togetherness, generating pleasure and emotional engagement for both ritual participants and the wider community. The ethical stage is reflected in the understanding of the tradition as a moral obligation and a form of familial responsibility toward both custom and community, functioning to strengthen social solidarity, regulate interpersonal relations, and maintain normative order within the society. Meanwhile, the religious stage becomes evident in the internalization of *mantu bubak* as an expression of faith, prayer, and surrender to God, representing an existential leap toward the transcendent dimension and a personal relationship with the Divine. Thus, *mantu bubak* cannot be regarded merely as a customary ritual; rather, it constitutes an existential expression of Javanese society in

¹³ Sugeng Rawuh, "Ragam Pandangan Tokoh Islam Terhadap Tradisi Bubakan Dalam Perkawinan Adat Jawa Di Desa Sendang Kecamatan Jambon Kabupaten Ponorogo" Institut Agama Islam Negeri Ponorogo, 2018.

interpreting marriage as a holistic experience encompassing social, moral, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously.

a. The Aesthetic Stage: Sensory Experience and Celebration

At the aesthetic stage, the *mantu bubak* tradition presents itself as a celebration rich in sensory, symbolic, and emotional experiences. The ritual procession is filled with various *uborampe* that function not merely as ceremonial accessories but also as elements forming a visual composition imbued with meaning and sacredness. Components such as the *daringan kebak*, consisting of *gendhaga kencana* and *gendhaga mulya*, *cok bakal*, offerings, Javanese *ayam ingkung*, *pisang raja*, *kain mori*, and pandan mats collectively create a ritual atmosphere that is both captivating and evocative of the continuity of ancestral traditions.¹⁴ Aesthetically, the diversity of these symbols generates a celebratory ambience that highlights beauty, order, and harmony.

For most community members, the moment of opening the *daringan kebak* and the distribution of bananas and coins constitute the most eagerly anticipated parts of the ritual. These scenes are often perceived as lively, joyful, and festive, as they create an atmosphere of togetherness and intense social interaction. At this level, the *mantu bubak* tradition is primarily understood as a space for collective celebration that provides entertainment, strengthens a sense of belonging, and affirms the community's cultural identity. The reflective and philosophical dimensions of the tradition do not necessarily become the main concern of the participants, as sensory and emotional experiences tend to dominate its interpretation.

Within the framework of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, the aesthetic stage is characterized by an orientation toward pleasure, novelty, and mood, in which individuals pursue emotionally gratifying experiences

¹⁴ Artati Agoes, *Kiat Sukses Menyelenggarakan Pesta Perkawinan Adat Jawa* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka, 2001).

without being bound by deep moral commitments.¹⁵ At this horizon, the *mantu bubak* tradition offers a medium through which community members can temporarily detach themselves from everyday routines, economic pressures, and social burdens, replacing them with a celebratory experience that is transient in nature.

Nevertheless, when the tradition is understood and practiced solely at the aesthetic level, its meaning risks being reduced to a repetitive ceremonial routine devoid of deeper reflection. From Kierkegaard's perspective, an aesthetic mode of existence that does not progress toward the ethical and religious stages is prone to becoming trapped in existential shallowness. Therefore, the aesthetic stage of *mantu bubak* should be understood as an initial gateway that opens the possibility for a transition toward more reflective, responsible, and transcendent forms of meaning.

b. The Ethical Stage: Obligation, Responsibility, and Social Control

The ethical dimension of the *mantu bubak* tradition emerges when the ritual is no longer understood merely as a celebration or a symbolic experience, but rather as a moral obligation and a form of familial responsibility toward custom, community, and the broader social order. For parents marrying off their first child, the performance of *mantu bubak* is perceived as a necessity to "open the way" for the child's marital life, while simultaneously preserving the family's dignity and honor within the community. This obligation is not purely personal; instead, it is rooted in collectively inherited norms that bind individuals to the community's value structure across generations.

Failure to perform or neglect of the *mantu bubak* tradition often generates feelings of guilt, moral unease, and social pressure from the surrounding environment. In this context, the tradition functions as an ethical standard that regulates familial behavior and frames social expectations regarding how marriage should be properly conducted.

¹⁵ Hardiman. *Filsafat Modern: Dari Machiavel Sampai Nietzsche*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Media, 2007.

Social judgments toward families who do not perform the ritual may manifest in subtle forms of stigma, such as perceptions of disrespect toward custom or a lack of responsibility for ancestral heritage. Thus, *mantu bubak* operates as a mechanism of social control that sustains normative continuity and maintains communal order.

The ritual symbols employed in *mantu bubak* further reinforce this ethical dimension. The *daringan kebak*, filled with rice and aged agricultural produce (*palawija kawak*), symbolizes the family's readiness to fulfill the basic needs of clothing and sustenance for a child entering married life. This symbol represents parental responsibility not only in a biological sense, but also in social and moral terms. The *ayam ingkung* reflects values of purity, sincerity, and sacrifice, while the *kain mori* signifies the seriousness of intention and the family's moral commitment in guiding the child into a new phase of life.¹⁶

The involvement of neighbors, relatives, and traditional leaders in the *mantu bubak* procession further strengthens the ethical function of this tradition as a space for articulating shared values. Such collective participation not only affirms the social legitimacy of the ritual, but also ensures the continued reproduction of values such as responsibility, adherence to communal norms, and social solidarity. Within the framework of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, the ethical stage is characterized by an individual's awareness of living within the horizon of universal values and a willingness to assume responsibility for the life choices one makes. Parents who decide to perform *mantu bubak*, despite the demands of financial cost, time, and physical effort, are in fact positioning themselves within the ethical stage: accepting obligations, binding themselves to moral decisions, and being prepared to bear the social and existential consequences of those choices.

¹⁶ Purwadi, *Upacara Tradisional Jawa* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2005).

c. The Religious Stage: Leap of Faith, Devotion, and the Reorientation of Traditional Meaning

The religious stage of the *mantu bubak* tradition becomes evident when ritual practice is no longer understood merely as a customary obligation or social norm, but is instead internalized as an act of devotion (*'ubūdiyyah*) and a leap of faith toward God. At this stage, the orientation of ritual actors shifts from conformity to tradition toward a more personal and inward spiritual relationship with Allah. In practice, the *mantu bubak* procession begins with *slametan udukan*, which includes the recitation of *tablil*, supplications, and *Ṣ alawāt* led by a religious figure or a traditional leader endowed with religious authority. These elements signify a conscious effort to situate the ritual within an Islamic framework, while simultaneously reducing the potential for magical or deterministic interpretations of the tradition.

The opening of the *gendhaga kencana* is accompanied by the recitation of the two testimonies of faith (*shahāda*) and Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, which local *pujonggo* interpret as a form of “religious ordering” (interview data). This interpretation indicates a process of symbolic integration between Javanese cultural elements and Islamic theological values. Rather than being abolished or abandoned, the tradition is reinterpreted to align with the principle of *tawḥīd*. Consequently, ritual symbols are no longer positioned as determinants of fate, but as media for expressing prayer, hope, and submission to divine will.

For informants who interpret *mantu bubak* through a religious lens, the performance of the tradition is grounded in gratitude for the parents' ability to marry off their child, as well as in spiritual endeavor (*ikhtiar*) to seek blessing, protection, and harmony in married life. They emphasize that the success or failure of a marriage ultimately lies within God's authority, while tradition functions merely as a cultural means to articulate prayer and surrender. This perspective reflects a theological awareness that clearly distinguishes between cultural endeavor and the determination of divine destiny.

From the perspective of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, the religious stage represents the highest phase of human existence, in which individuals transcend rational calculation and ethical demands to enter a personal relationship with God through a leap of faith. At this stage, the meaning of human action is no longer determined primarily by social recognition or moral obligation, but by the intensity of one's inner relationship with the Transcendent. In the context of *mantu bubak*, the religious stage is reflected in the willingness of ritual participants to place the tradition entirely under divine will, without negating the cultural values embedded within it. Accordingly, *mantu bubak* becomes a space for negotiating identity among Javanese Muslims, where religious existence does not reject local custom but reorients its meaning toward *tawhīd*. The tension between preserving tradition and maintaining doctrinal purity is managed through processes of symbolic reinterpretation and the purification of intention. As a result, the tradition persists not as an alternative belief system, but as a cultural expression of a living and dynamic faith.

C. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the people of Sumberjo Village generally perceive the *mantu bubak* tradition as an important cultural practice worthy of preservation due to its significant social, cultural, and psychological functions. The tradition plays a role in strengthening familial ties, reinforcing social solidarity and mutual cooperation, and maintaining the continuity of Javanese customs amid the dynamics of modernization. Nevertheless, the findings also reveal critical perspectives among certain religious figures and educated groups who call for a reinterpretation of the tradition so that it does not conflict with the principle of *tawhīd* and is not positioned as a prerequisite for the legal validity of marriage. This dialectic between the preservation of tradition and the purification of religious teachings indicates that *mantu bubak* is a dynamic tradition, open to ongoing processes of meaning negotiation. From the perspective of Søren Kierkegaard's existentialism, *mantu bubak*

represents three stages of human existence. At the aesthetic stage, the tradition is experienced as a sensory and symbolic celebration that generates a sense of beauty and togetherness. At the ethical stage, it is understood as a moral obligation and a form of familial social responsibility, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism of social control within the community. At the religious stage, *mantu bubak* becomes a medium for the expression of faith, manifested through prayer, gratitude, trust in God, and a transcendent orientation toward the Divine. These three stages do not appear in isolation, but are interwoven within concrete ritual practices.

Accordingly, *mantu bubak* not only represents a legacy of Javanese cultural heritage, but also constitutes an existential space for Javanese Muslim subjects to negotiate freedom, life choices, moral responsibility, and their relationship with God within the context of marriage. This study contributes to the enrichment of socio-religious philosophical discourse by demonstrating how local traditions can be interpreted as expressions of a living religious existence. Future research is recommended to expand the scope of study sites, compare variations of *mantu bubak* practices in different regions, and integrate interdisciplinary approaches in order to deepen understanding of the dynamics of local traditions within contemporary religious landscapes.

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