

# Have Young Javanese People Lost their Cultural Identity?

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## **Abstract**

There is a saying “*wong jawa wis ilang jawane*” or that many young Javanese people have lost their Javanese characters. There are so many moral values taught in Javanese culture, either through its language, its proverbs, its traditions, symbols, or literature. There is a tendency that many Javanese people are not familiar with basic moral values of Javanese due to the fact that they are more exposed to global cultures that are quite different from the Javanese. This, in turn, makes the old generation complain that the young generation don’t behave well, show no respect to older people. What Javanese important moral values are supposed to be taught to the young generation and how to do it is the focus of this paper, and it is through education. Education is one factor to maintain or destroy a local culture. It is time to reexamine our education policy in order to revitalize local wisdoms to improve our young generation’s morality.

## **Introduction**

Dorais (1988: 293-294) explains that cultural identity can be defined as the basic consciousness of one’s own group’s specificity amongst other peoples, in terms of living habits, customs, language, values, etc. Cultural identity is universal, because all people in the world are conscious of some sort of specificity that set them apart from others. By contrast, ethnic identity (ethnicity) only seems to occur within complex societies, when it appears functional to divide people into categories based upon something other than gender, age or occupation (Simon 1983; Elbaz, 1985). Ethnicity is linked to cultural identity because in order to categorize people, one must often refer to some of their cultural, linguistic, or religious specificities. However, ethnic classification may be based upon totally non-cultural criteria, such as physical appearance or place of origin. One of the prerequisites of such classifications is that all ethnic groups (such as

Javanese, Sundanese, or Indonesian?) interact within the same broad social structure, whether it is national society or the global village.

Talking about Javanese people, we have to define who the Javanese people are. Originally, Javanese people are those belong to Javanese ethnic group. It is one big ethnic group living in Java Island, especially in the east and central part of the island. But now so many Javanese people have moved and lived in other parts of Indonesia. They can be found everywhere in Indonesia. Those who have moved and lived in other areas may adopt other culture in which they live, so that sometimes it is not easy to recognize that they are Javanese. On the other hand, those who are still living in Javanese community, such as those living in East Java, Central Java and Yogyakarta Special Territory, are supposed to have maintained Javanese culture so that they can be easily recognized as Javanese people. However, many people say that Javanese people, especially the young generation, tend to have lost their cultural identity or in Javanese it is said that *wong jawa wis ilang jawane*. What Javanese characters are lost and why they lose them are the points discussed in this paper.

### **Javanese Cultural Identity**

Cultural identity of a certain ethnic group can be identified from the language the people speak, the custom they wear, the living habit they adopt, the moral value they cherish, the food they eat and so forth. In this paper I don't want to discuss all of them, rather I only focus on the language. Javanese people can be recognized from the language they use, namely Javanese language. Javanese people should be able to speak Javanese language. However, so many Javanese people do not speak Javanese anymore. So many Javanese families, especially those who live in cities or towns prefer to use Indonesian language in their daily communication. Many Javanese parents do not use Javanese as the mother tongue for their children. There are many reasons why they do not use Javanese anymore. Some say that it is not practical. Javanese is considered to be more difficult than Indonesian. There are many levels of Javanese, namely *Krama, Madya, and Ngoko* (Sarjana Hadiatmaja 2011: 63), and it is not easy to master to use each level appropriately. Javanese family who live in villages still use Javanese as the mother tongue for their children, but only the ngoko (the low level) that is used. Therefore, young Javanese generation who live in villages tend to master the low level (ngoko) only and not the higher levels. Some others say that it is not prestigious to speak Javanese. They look down on the language. They are not proud to

use the language in daily communication. They consider it not sound modern, look so old and out of date. Furthermore, Javanese language is not used as the language of instruction at school. That is why Javanese young generation tend to leave Javanese language, one of their identities.

Language is closely linked with culture. Culture can be seen as the “know-how” that a person must possess to get through the tasks of daily living (Wardhaugh, 2006: 221). The relationship between language and culture is that the language used determines the way in which the speakers of that language view the world, or, how the speakers view the world is reflected in the language used (Whorf cited in Wardhaugh 2006: 222). How Javanese people view the world is reflected in the language, and through the language they pass the moral values to the young generation. When the young generation do not speak the language anymore, they will certainly miss the moral values embedded in it. There are so many moral values that young Javanese people are not familiar with. I will only take one example taken from a traditional Javanese verse (macapat) called *Mijil*, says as follows:

*Dedalane guna lawan sekti;*

*Kudu andhap asor;*

*Wani ngalah dhuwur wekasane;*

*Tumungkula yen dipun dukani,*

*Bapang den singkiri;*

*Ana catur mungkur .* (taken from KGPA. Mangkunagara IV as cited in Sarjana Hadiatmaja. 2011: 55)

From this traditional verse, there is moral teaching how to behave well in society so that we can live in harmony with other people. *Andhap asor* (low profile, not arrogant), *wani ngalah* (not aggressive) are some ideal characters of javanese people. *Tumungkula yen dipun dukani* (if your parents are angry or criticize you because you do something wrong, listen to them, keep quiet, and don't stare to the eyes) is an advise how to behave to the parents or the older person. *Bapang den singkiri* (avoid fight or quarrel), *ana catur mungkur* (don't get involved in useless gossips, or just leave them when you happen to hear them) are also advise how to live in harmony with other people.

Sarjana Hadiatmaja (2011: 55) further says that ideal moral values Javanese people should apply include *mawas dhiri* (self reflective), *budi luhur* (noble minded), *tepa slira* (considerate), *mrawira* (chivalrous), *rumangsa* (conscious), and *ngerti ing semu* (being sensitive). *Mawas dhiri* (self reflective) means that we should reflect or look into our deepest heart and soul to see whether we have behaved well, said truth or lies, or perhaps we have hurt other people. We have to be honest in this case, and then improve or correct our conduct. *Budi luhur* (noble minded) means that we have to be kind hearted, no hatred, no spite, no jealousy. *Tepa slira* (considerate) means that we have to be able to feel other people's difficult position. When we possess this character, we don't easily blame other people or make other people feel ashamed. *Mrawira* (chivalrous) means that we have to be courageous and ready to help the weak and the poor. We are not allowed to be *nylekuthis* (acting that makes us look degraded or contemptible). *Rumangsa* (self conscious) means that we have to realize that whatever we do is being watched by other people or by The Almighty God, therefore we have to act very carefully. *Ngerti ing semu* (being sensitive) means that we have to be able to understand meanings or messages that are not clearly or directly stated by other people. These are the moral values that Javanese people should possess. These moral values are presented in various modes or forms, such as in *tembang* (songs or verses), in proverbs, or even in signs or symbols.

When Javanese language is used in community, the people involved will readily learn the culture and understand easily how to behave, how to conduct, how to speak in an appropriate manner that is acceptable. However, more and more young Javanese people are leaving the language, so that they seldom and even never use it for communication. They rarely hear the language, never pay any attention to the contents, and as a consequence, they are not familiar with Javanese culture and so, they lose some of their identity as Javanese people.

*Ngerti ing semu* is the Javanese character that is mostly left. People are not sensitive anymore. They do not understand other people's intentions without being told explicitly. On the other side, Javanese people are not supposed to talk anything openly. This is meant to avoid conflict, or to avoid making other people embarrassed or get hurt. Therefore the real Javanese people will only keep silent, do not say anything or only give signs such as blinking eyes, when they witness other people's misconduct. Conflicts will certainly arise when there is no mutual understanding. I often witness situations in which Javanese young people do not act wisely because they are not

sensitive to their surroundings. For example, in a meeting when limited lunch is served, they eat as much as they like without thinking whether other people behind them will still get their meal. Or, they just sit, busily eating and being served by the older people without feeling uneasy. This is very strange in Javanese culture but they do not feel it because they are not sensitive (*orangerti ing semu*).

### **How to make the young generation understand their local culture**

How to make young Javanese people understand their culture better? Surely it is not an easy task, since it is a very complex process that demands collaboration from various parties. One way is through the language education policy. We need a policy that enables us to preserve our local languages, love our national language, and master an international language. Although it is stated that Indonesian language is declared to function as the national language, official language, and also the language of instruction at school, meaning that it is the majority language in Indonesia, it does not mean that it is a wise choice to leave local languages to die. Any language, including a local language, is an important asset that needs to be preserved. Why? Because "...through our language, we have access to our culture and humanity. All languages have the same potential for these functions. It is therefore an enormous human impoverishment when a language, with all its collective wisdom, beauty, and richness, falls silent" (McCarthy, Skutnabb-Kangas, and Magga, 2008: 298). When we lose a language, we lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art (Hale, 2001 as cited by McCarthy, Skutnabb-Kangas, and Magga, 2008: 298)

The next question is how to revitalize our local languages. Education plays an important role to make the young generation get knowledge of, familiar with, and love their local language. Education in the lower level, especially in play groups, Kindergartens had better use local language as the language for instruction. While in higher levels, such as in elementary and secondary schools, local language should be taught as a local subject, in which moral values and local cultures are taught. Daily communication in the family and the in local community levels should use the local language. Anyone intending to stay in a certain community is advised to learn to speak the local language used in that community.

## Conclusion

The saying “wong jawa wis ilang jawane” seems to be true since many Javanese people do not speak Javanese language anymore. Javanese language is one cultural identity of Javanese people. Since they do not speak the language they are not familiar with the culture, or the moral values imbedded in it. Education seems to be the key tool to make the young generation learn, understand, and master the local language and familiar with the local culture. A proper language education policy is needed.

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