



**SOCIAL STIGMA AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE WIVES OF FORMER GEMBLAK
IN JAVANESE CULTURE**

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Abstract

This study discusses the experiences of former gemblak wives in interpreting their husbands' past, as well as the forms of social stigma and impression management strategies they employ in their daily lives. The tradition of gemblakan, which was once accepted as part of the culture and spirituality of warok, has undergone a change in meaning with the development of religious values, modernity, and shifts in the representation of Reyog Ponorogo art. Using Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach, this study explores how the meaning of experience is formed through intersubjectivity and the Javanese cultural lifeworld, which emphasizes an attitude of acceptance. Meanwhile, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and impression management is used to analyze how former gemblaks and their families deal with negative labeling from society. The results of the study show that the wives of former gemblak are able to negotiate their husbands' past through cultural acceptance, social adaptation, and family image management strategies in order to maintain harmony and acceptance within their social environment. These findings confirm that cultural dynamics, modern values, and subjective experiences play an important role in shaping the family's response to social stigma.

Keywords: *Gemblak, Social Stigma, Impression Management, Schutz's Phenomenology, Javanese Culture*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas pengalaman istri mantan gemblak dalam memaknai masa lalu suaminya, serta bentuk stigma sosial dan strategi pengelolaan kesan yang mereka lakukan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Tradisi gemblakan yang dahulu diterima sebagai bagian dari budaya dan spiritualitas warok mengalami perubahan makna seiring berkembangnya nilai keagamaan, modernitas, dan pergeseran representasi seni Reyog Ponorogo. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi Alfred Schutz, penelitian ini menggali bagaimana pemaknaan pengalaman terbentuk melalui intersubjektivitas dan lifeworld budaya Jawa yang menekankan sikap *nrimo ing pandum*. Sementara itu, teori stigma dan impression management Erving Goffman digunakan untuk menganalisis bagaimana mantan gemblak dan keluarganya menghadapi pelabelan negatif dari masyarakat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa istri mantan gemblak mampu menegosiasikan masa lalu suaminya melalui penerimaan budaya, adaptasi sosial, serta strategi pengelolaan citra keluarga agar tetap harmonis dan diterima oleh lingkungan sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa dinamika budaya, nilai



modern, dan pengalaman subjektif berperan penting dalam membentuk respons keluarga terhadap stigma sosial.

Kata Kunci: Gemblak, Stigma Sosial, Impression Management, Fenomenologi Schutz, Budaya Jawa

I. INTRODUCTION

Gemblak is the term for male jathil dancers (male dancers) before they transition to female. However, it's important to note that not all jathil lanang are gemblak, synonymous with warok lovers. Generally, gemblak are aged 10-17, have attractive faces and come from financially disadvantaged families. To become a gemblak, one must go through a marriage proposal process, similar to proposing to a prospective wife. In this transaction, the gemblak is treated as a "child" or "pangon" (laborer employed for a predetermined wage). However, gemblak can also be employed in other forms, acting like a wife to their warok owner. When discussing warok and gemblak, the art of reyog is inextricably linked. Each warok and gemblak community has at least one reyog unit. This art form remains a key part of Ponorogo's identity and a world-renowned cultural heritage. On December 3, 2024, Reyog was officially designated a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage at the 19th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Asuncion, Paraguay.

The relationship between gemblak and warok has become a tradition among the people of Ponorogo. This tradition serves as a "spiritual practice" for warok to maintain their supernatural powers. Warok, as wara' (a term for those who follow the Sufi path), are subject to taboos (prohibitions) on sexual intercourse with women. Sexual intercourse with women or relations with women other than their wives will erode their magical powers, leading to the loss of their bones and immunity. Therefore, the warok embrace gemblak as a companion to their spiritual practices. Initially, the gemblak tradition remained an important part of community life. However, by the late 1980s, tensions between tradition and religion began to ease. Islam continued to pursue various initiatives, such as intensive movements, Islamization, and renewal in various aspects. This effort aimed to eliminate mystical elements from community life and replace them with more rational worship. The high level of public education also influenced mindsets, so that hegemonic practices and ideologies that harmed one party were seen as forms of oppression of human rights. In 1988, the central government

approved Reyog performances featuring women as jathil dancers. By the late 1980s, the tradition of menggemblak (traditional dance) began to become rare in Ponorogo society.

The disappearance of the gemblak tradition certainly did not leave a lasting social impact. Numerous academic studies have been conducted on reyog, particularly those involving warok and gemblak, with the majority of the research focusing on the issue of sexual deviance and the social stigma faced by both warok and gemblak performers. However, a closer look at the relationship between warok and gemblak reveals the inescapable role of a woman, the wife. Likewise, the social stigma faced by the gemblak does not stop with the individual but also creates a hereditary stigma for his family, especially for his wife, his current life partner. Therefore, this study will present how the wife of a former gemblak interprets her husband's position in the gemblak tradition in her current life, the social stigmas experienced by the former gemblak and his wife, and the strategies they employ to address these social stigmas.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological method with a cultural case study. Phenomenology can be defined as the study of the core experiences felt by individuals through the perspective of the person experiencing them. This approach emphasizes the world or reality as something separate from the individual, attempting to explain the meaning of experiences in everyday life (life-world). This method was chosen because it was appropriate for exploring the subjective experiences of the wives of former gemblak members in interpreting their husbands' historical legacy as participants in the gemblak tradition while facing societal stigma, as well as constructing strategies for managing their household life. Data collection was conducted through interviews with former gemblak members, their wives, and male jathilan dancers. In addition to interviews, the researcher also utilized various literature sources such as articles, books, and news reports. The collected data were then analyzed using thematic analysis, which includes coding, identifying themes, and interpreting meaning from a phenomenological perspective.

In line with the focus of the study on social stigma and impression management, theories are needed to serve as a foundation for analysis in this study. The researcher chose to use Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory, which emphasizes how individuals give meaning to their experiences in the everyday world. Furthermore, the researcher also used

Erving Goffman's theory to analyze stigma, as Goffman defines stigma as a negative social label given by society to individuals deemed to deviate from prevailing social values and norms. In the analysis, the researcher also utilized Javanese cultural values closely related to the traditional setting in which it occurred.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

1. A Wife's Experience in Understanding Her Husband's Position as a Performer of the Gemblakan Tradition

Culture essentially has two aspects: physical and non-physical, such as religion, art, beliefs, and others. The presence of these aspects influences the way of life of a community group. Culture can be defined as a form of procedure deliberately passed down from generation to generation, encompassing norms and values agreed upon by the community. Culture, as a form of localized societal behavior, or local culture, is not limited solely by cultural aspects but also by the region where a group resides. Local culture continues to develop within communities and serves as a guideline. Therefore, local culture is not simply values, activities, and the results of ancestral activities or heritage. Rather, each cultural element that prevails in a community becomes a distinctive characteristic of that community. The definition of local culture itself is the culture inherent in a region and reflects the social conditions within that region. Some elements of local culture include stories, folklore, regional songs, regional rituals, and local customs.

Tradition is a powerful element in determining the movements and actions of members of society. Tradition is often referred to as habits or customs. Like religion, traditions are adhered to by society and carried out collectively or individually, regularly according to established timetables passed down through generations. Similar to cultures in other regions of Indonesia, Javanese culture also has its own distinctive characteristics, particularly in terms of spirituality or spiritual beliefs, which later gave rise to the concept known as *kejawen*. According to experts, *kejawen* is a fusion of Islam with traditional religions and beliefs that previously grew and developed within Javanese society.

Javanese culture teaches an important value for living life, namely the teaching of *nrimo ing pandum*. The concept of *nrimo* stems from Javanese philosophy, which describes a calm, unhurried attitude and acceptance of everything that occurs in life. *Nrimo* is not simply a passive acceptance of circumstances, but rather a way of coping with life by accepting one's

own circumstances, which is preceded by hard work and grounded in a relationship with God. Accepting the importance of accepting the past is a source of inner peace, self-control, and a form of gratitude to God.

This acceptance of the past is evident in RN (56), the wife of a former *gemblak*. She accepts her husband's past because the *gemblak* tradition was commonplace in her community at the time. RN also stated that she comes from a family that practices *tayub*, a traditional Javanese dance featuring female dancers (*ledhek*) accompanied by *gamelan* music. They dance alongside male guests in entertainment and traditional community ceremonies. RN's husband, SM (69), also stated that his father-in-law was also a *gemblak*. Therefore, their community already understands them, and therefore, her husband's past is not a significant issue for him. In Schutz's view, this situation demonstrates a process of intersubjectivity, namely a shared understanding between RN and the surrounding community regarding the *gemblak* tradition. The social environment that accepts her husband's past reinforces RN's understanding that it is not something to worry about. However, RN revealed that there was one thing that made her uncomfortable: the presence of transvestites in her husband's studio every time a *reyog* gathering took place. RN's discomfort with the transvestites' presence stemmed from their rude language. Furthermore, there were no issues related to her husband's past. This suggests that RN's acceptance of her husband's past has been established, while her discomfort stems from social interactions she perceives as exceeding the bounds of decency. From Schutz's lifeworld concept, RN's understanding of her husband's past is inextricably linked to the world she has lived in since childhood, namely Javanese culture, which views the *gemblakan* tradition as something normal. This lifeworld shapes how RN assesses these experiences without any internal conflict.

From Schutz's perspective, a social reality does not simply emerge, but is shaped through how individuals assign meaning to their daily life experiences. In the context of the wives of former *gemblak* (traditional Indonesian men), their understanding of their husbands' pasts is shaped by their own life experiences and the way they interact and negotiate with their social environment. This interpretation is formed through a process of grouping experiences into specific categories for easier understanding (typification). Thus, the wives' perspectives on their husbands' pasts are not merely personal feelings, but rather the result of

constructing meaning in social reality from their own perspectives, as explained in Schutz's phenomenology.

Upon closer examination, RN's interpretations are formed through a process of typification, namely, grouping her personal experiences into categories she deems logical. She positions her husband's past as a form of common tradition, while she understands the disrespectful behavior of transvestites as behavior that violates norms. Thus, RN's interpretation of her husband's past is not merely an emotional response, but rather a result of a construction of meaning shaped by personal experiences, Javanese cultural values, and the influence of social interactions.

1) Societal Stigma Against Former Gemblak and Their Families

According to Goffman, stigma is a label that tarnishes a person's image in the eyes of society. Stigma is not individual in nature, but rather is formed through social interactions. Goffman classified stigma into three types: first, tribal stigma, which is stigma related to ethnicity, religion, and nationality. Second, Blemishes of Individual Character, which is stigma related to individual character defects, such as drunkenness and homosexuality. Third, Abominations of the Body, which is stigma directly related to physical inequalities or disabilities, such as crippling, deafness, blindness, and speech impairment.

These types of stigma explain that individuals who bear negative social labels need to actively confront societal perceptions. To understand how individuals interact with this stigma, Goffman uses the analogy of theater (dramaturgy): social life is viewed as a stage, where individuals act as actors trying to project a certain impression on the audience. The self presented is not entirely the individual's own, but rather the result of social interactions between the actor (the individual) and the audience (the social environment). Individuals use impression management techniques to maintain a certain image, especially when faced with stigma. The process of stigmatization requires individuals to manage their self-image to remain accepted in social interactions.

Social stigma in this context is not only formed through direct interactions but is also reinforced by cultural constructs that develop within society. Changing values and norms regarding masculinity make former gemblak increasingly vulnerable to negative labeling, especially when society begins to assume that the ideal man must appear assertive and unrelated to traits considered feminine. This shift in views is further strengthened when the

gemblak tradition undergoes a change in social status, from a practice once considered prestigious to one viewed as morally deviant.

Furthermore, changes in artistic representation also played a role in reinforcing this stigma. When jathil dancers were replaced by women through the Ponorogo National Reyog Festival in the mid-1990s, the public increasingly considered the involvement of men in this role no longer aligned with contemporary cultural values. This change contributed to the perception that former gemblak dancers were irrelevant and carried negative connotations. This situation forced former gemblak dancers and their families to adapt socially amidst the changing cultural constructs.

Besides being formed through direct interaction, the stigma against former gemblak was also reinforced by the influence of cultural and media representations. In some public narratives, the word gemblak is often associated with moral issues and sexual orientation, thus reinforcing negative assumptions about those who once played this role. However, efforts by the arts community have been made to change public perception through the media, including the production of documentaries showcasing cultural values, dance skills, and the process of preserving traditions. This media is used as a way to dispel the negative association between gemblak and jathil lanang and emphasize that these artistic practices are part of Ponorogo's cultural identity and must be preserved. This effort demonstrates the important role of media in changing people's perspectives and reducing stigma by conveying more positive narratives about local traditions.

This phenomenon aligns with Goffman's concept of stigma, where individuals confront negative social labels through community interactions. This is evident in the experience of SM, a former gemblak (traditional Javanese dancer). He said that while in school, he experienced bullying by his classmates for dancing jathilan. In response, he worked hard to prove his worth and to prove to the public that he would succeed through the arts. He continued his dance education and actively participated in reyog events. He then pooled his earnings from his hard work to establish a dance studio. He believed that whatever he gained from his artistic endeavors would be returned to the cause of the arts.

The family of a former gemblak has also experienced stigma in their personal experience, as recounted by RN:

"I was once asked while dropping off a child at school, where does his house live? Where is SM's house next to his. *Leh wong kae (SM) yo rabi? lek ora rabi piye to, anake wes mbrojol loro, lah mboten niku jenengan mrono dhewe*" (I was once asked while dropping off a child at school, where does his house live? Where is SM's house next to his? That person is also married. What if he's not married? He already has two children. If you don't believe me, please come to his house yourself).

Analysis, based on SM and RN's experiences, shows that stigma is not only experienced by the former *gemblak* individual, but also by his family, through questions and moral judgments from society. This phenomenon demonstrates that negative social labels are formed through social interactions, in line with Goffman's concept of stigma. The impact of this stigma influences self-image, and the family finds ways to cope with and adapt to the stigma imposed by society.

2) Wives' Strategies for Facing Stigma and Maintaining Household Harmony Through Impression Management

Javanese culture implements the concept of *nyuwiji*, or *nyuwiji*, which symbolizes the close union of two or more elements to face the realities of life. One common example of *nyuwiji* often cited is marriage. However, this concept is not only manifested in marriage but also in everyday life, such as in the choice of profession, residence, and pets. Thus, it appears that building harmony with the environment is a Javanese way of finding peace in life. As taught by their ancestors, humans must be clever at *memayu hayuning bawana*. By doing good to nature, they will receive blessings from the environment.

Meanwhile, in the modern sociological world of Impression Management, Goffman analogized life as a stage. Actors strive to play their roles in the performance. Actors strive to package their roles as well as possible to achieve their desired goals. In performances, the actors highly expect audience appreciation because, according to Abraham Maslow's theory, humans need self-esteem. There are two types of self-esteem: self-respect and appreciation from others. Unconsciously, every individual engages in impression management in every interaction. One example of impression management in the digital age is the use of social media. Through social media, users can create an impression of themselves by utilizing engaging features that allow them to express themselves through visualizing their activities.

In the context of modern social interaction, impression management is a crucial strategy for shaping self-image to maintain social acceptance. Social media users, for example, consciously select and display content that portrays themselves as positive, competent, and deserving of respect. Through controlled posts, such as those about productive activities, achievements, and the delivery of moral messages, individuals strive to gain acceptance, recognition, and trust from others. Thus, social media serves not only as a means of sharing information but also as a strategic tool for building and maintaining a desired self-image in modern social interactions.

In the context of Javanese culture, the practice of impression management is also evident in how women perform their social roles. In Javanese culture, women are portrayed as gentle, polite, soft-spoken, obedient, respectful of men, and able to position themselves in society (without bringing shame to the family). Women are born to be *pengun* (a place for human growth), so a nation will not be strong without respecting the role of women. Women often experience significant role changes after marriage. Within the household, women tend to adapt to their husband's activities. In Javanese, women are called *kanca wingking*, meaning "backroom companion," and play a role only in the domestic sphere (well, bed, kitchen). Women's primary duties are the 3Ms (*macak, masak, manak*). *Macak*, women must be skilled at self-care not only for personal satisfaction but also to honor their husbands. *Masak*, women must be able to cook. Women are expected to meet the family's nutritional needs by serving prepared food. However, in the digital era, not being able to cook is not a serious problem, a variety of foods can be accessed digitally. *Manak*, women are responsible for giving birth to offspring. Offspring are seen as the continuation of the family. This tradition demonstrates the success of being a mother with good moral values. However, in the modern era, women have greater opportunities for education, careers, and employment. Today's women are no longer confined to the role of "*kanca wingking*" (a male companion), but can also contribute in the public sphere.

The husband's role in the household is as a leader, an *imam* (leader) of the family. If the wife is the first school for her children (*al-ummu madrasatu al-uula*), then the husband is their principal. As head of the family, the husband is responsible for his family's education, especially his wife's. RN stated that before marrying SM, she had never had an interest in art,

despite coming from an artistic family background. After marrying SM, she admitted to learning a lot from her husband, such as applying makeup and making costumes.

Thus, Goffman's concept of impression management helps explain how women in Javanese culture negotiate their self-image roles in both domestic and public spaces. In the context of a former *gemblak* household, impression management strategies are employed not only by the husband, who has experienced stigma, but also by the wife, who helps build the family's image through social roles, moral support, and adaptation to her husband's activities. RN's experience learning to apply makeup and make costumes after marrying SM demonstrates that impression management is not solely about appearance but also relates to the ability to demonstrate the family's functioning as a harmonious and productive unit. Therefore, an understanding of (dramaturgy) and impression management provides an analytical basis for seeing how the families of former *gemblak* construct a positive self-image amidst the negative stigma of society.

IV. CONCLUSION

The *gemblakan* tradition is a Javanese cultural practice that was considered normal at the time, particularly within the context of *warok* spirituality and the *Reyog Ponorogo* art form. However, changes in social and religious values have shifted the meaning of this tradition and given rise to stigma for the practitioners and their families. The wives of former *gemblak* members interpret their husbands' past through life experiences, Javanese cultural values, and the social environment that embraces the tradition. This process of meaning-making demonstrates that social reality is shaped through subjective experience, as explained in Schutz's phenomenology, where *lifeworld* and intersubjectivity form the basis for individuals to give meaning to the social world they encounter.

On the other hand, the stigma that has arisen against former *gemblak* members and their families stems not only from changing moral values but also from media representations and public perceptions that associate *gemblak* members with character deviations. To address this stigma, the families of former *gemblak* members employ impression management strategies, as described by Goffman, through efforts to demonstrate family functioning, involvement in the arts, and positive social behavior. These strategies help them maintain domestic harmony and maintain their self-image amid the demands of modern society.

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