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Cultural Meaning and Social Response of the Lasolo Street Community in Kendari City to the Threat of Flooding in Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the cultural meaning and social responses of the community on Lasolo street, Sanua Village, Kendari City, in facing the threat of recurring floods. A qualitative approach with a case study design was used to explore in-depth the community's experiences, meanings, and adaptation strategies to disasters. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results show that the community interprets flooding as a consequence of environmental damage, spatial changes, and increased population density, rather than simply as a natural phenomenon. In responding to flooding, the community demonstrates strong social solidarity through the practice of mutual cooperation, community-based information systems, and the active role of local leaders in coordinating disaster management. This study also found that cultural factors significantly influence adaptation strategies, such as the construction of stilt houses, the use of natural signs as warning indicators, and the utilization of social networks in emergency response. These findings confirm that cultural meaning, social responses, and adaptation based on local wisdom form important community resilience in facing flood risks. This study implies that disaster mitigation policies need to consider the cultural perspectives and social dynamics of local communities.

Keywords: cultural meaning, social response, community adaptation, flooding, community resilience

INTRODUCTION

Climate change and socioeconomic developments can increase the frequency and severity of floods. Flood management is widely recognized as an effective way to reduce the adverse consequences, and a more resilient and sustainable flood management approach has been the goal in recent studies. Disastrous floods driven by rapid urbanization and extreme weather events have caused millions of fatalities, and continue to cause tens of billions of dollars of direct economic loss each year.[1] Hirschboeck argues 'until very recently, the

status quo in many forms of flood analysis has been to treat events in a hydrologic time series as a set of varying time-ordered numerical values'.[2] She adds that the methodologies that have been developed and refined through the years to manipulate, model, and predict flood values have become increasingly sophisticated. Moreover, Hirschboeck notes that the cross-discipline of hydrometeorology, which Bruce and Clark define as "an approach through meteorology to the solution of hydrologic problems" (p. 2), has evolved to analyze the relatively short-term interactions between the atmosphere and hydrosphere at micro-, meso-, and synoptic spatial scales of influence.

Rain is seen as one of the most important weather and climate forecasting variables because it influences human life activities in various sectors, such as agriculture, transportation, trade, health, the environment, and so on.[3] Rainfall is one of the most difficult atmospheric variables to predict, and at present, it remains a major challenge for meteorological researchers[4] and one of the serious problems faced by local governments and urban communities is flooding.[5] Floods can become disasters when they disrupt human life and even threaten safety. Flood hazard management can be carried out using structural and non-structural methods. Two definitions of flooding are: (1) a river flow that exceeds the normal water level, overflowing the riverbed, causing inundation in low-lying areas along the riverbank, inundating settlements; and (2) a flood wave traveling downstream along a river system interacting with rising water levels at the estuary due to storms.[6] Flooding can also occur because areas that are usually dry (not wet land) are inundated by water resulting from high rainfall and the topography of the area in the form of concave lowlands, apart from that, this event can also occur because the water capacity exceeds the discharge of the river flow system.[7]

Flooding is one of the most frequent hydrometeorological disasters and has a significant impact on the lives of Indonesians. This phenomenon not only causes physical damage such as damage to infrastructure, homes, and public facilities, but also has long-lasting social, economic, and psychological impacts. In various regions of Indonesia, the increasing frequency and intensity of flooding is related to various factors, both natural and non-natural. Heavy rainfall, increased river discharge, climate change, and environmental degradation are the main drivers of flooding. On the other hand, population growth, uncontrolled residential development, and changes in spatial planning without regard for sustainability principles also exacerbate the situation.

Hydrometeorological disasters are defined as natural processes or phenomena of atmospheric, hydrological or oceanographic nature[8] This study defines a hazard as a natural event that has the potential to cause harm and a disaster as the effect of the hazard on a community.[9] According to Jayawardena hydrometeorological disasters cause more than 75% of the damage to human life and property among the three major types of natural hazards in the world, geological, hydrometeorological, and biological. [10] Hydrometeorological hazards include floods, droughts, coastal erosion, cyclones of all types, landslides, avalanches, heat waves, cold waves, and debris flow.[10] Disasters triggered by hydrometeorological hazards are referred to as hydrometeorological disasters.[11]

Kendari City, as one of the developing cities in eastern Indonesia, also faces significant challenges related to flooding. Over the past two decades, flooding in Kendari City has increased both in terms of frequency and affected areas. One of the most vulnerable areas to flooding is Lasolo street, Sanua Village, West Kendari District. This area is a densely populated area that developed organically without adequate spatial planning. This situation is exacerbated by the relatively sloping topography of the area, small rivers flowing through residential areas, and a drainage system

unable to accommodate the volume of water during high rainfall.

The flooding problem on Lasolo street cannot be understood solely as a physical issue; it is also closely related to the social and cultural aspects of the community. The people living in this area have long lived side by side with the threat of flooding. They have developed various adaptation strategies based on local knowledge, collective experience, and cultural values embedded within the community. Values such as mutual cooperation, kinship solidarity, and social awareness play a crucial role in fostering community resilience to disasters. In the context of the Tolaki, Bugis, Muna, and Javanese communities living in the area, cultural values shape how they think, interpret flood events, and determine the adaptation measures they take.

Cultural studies view disasters as phenomena not only related to physical damage but also to the processes of meaning constructed by society. Geertz emphasized that culture is a network of meanings created by humans, and through this network of meanings, humans understand the world and act within it.[12] Thus, flooding is seen not only as a natural event but also as a cultural phenomenon, containing meanings, interpretations, and symbolism from the communities experiencing it. These interpretations determine how communities respond to disasters, develop adaptation strategies, and manage risks in their daily lives.

In the context of Lasolo street, environmental changes that have occurred in recent years have exacerbated the potential for flooding. Land conversion, narrowing of the riverbed, accumulation of waste in drainage channels, and the weakening of upstream vegetation have contributed to the increased vulnerability of this area.[13] The Kendari City Government has undertaken several mitigation efforts, but has not yet fully addressed the root causes of the problem, particularly concerning community social behavior and the cultural values that develop within it.[14] Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of how communities interpret flooding, how they act and adapt, and the cultural factors that influence this behavior is crucial.

Flood research has tended to focus on technical aspects such as drainage systems, water management, and infrastructure planning.[15] Studies on the socio-cultural aspects of disaster response are still relatively limited, even though these aspects play a significant role in building community resilience.[16] Community resilience in the face of disasters is determined not only by physical preparedness but also by the strength of social ties, community networks, and cultural values that encourage individuals and groups to support each other in times of crisis.[17],[18]

Given this complexity, this research is crucial to understand how the people of Lasolo street construct cultural meanings about flooding, how their social responses are formed, and how cultural values influence their adaptation strategies. [19],[20] This research is expected to provide a new perspective on culture-based disaster risk management, particularly in the context of urban communities with high cultural diversity. Furthermore, the findings of this study can provide input for policy makers in designing flood mitigation programs that rely not only on technical approaches but also on the social and cultural conditions of the local community.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design focusing on the community of Lasolo street, Sanua Village, West Kendari District, Kendari City, which is a flood-prone area and inhabited by a multi-ethnic community. Informants were determined through purposive and snowball sampling techniques with the criteria of having lived there for at least five years, having experienced flooding directly, and understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of the local community. Informants

consisted of community leaders, neighborhood association (or RT) and resident association (or RW) heads, religious leaders, disaster volunteers, and flood-affected residents. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, field observations, and documentation in the form of flood photos, community notes, media archives, and local government reports. Interviews were conducted semi-structured to explore cultural meanings, flood experiences, and forms of social response and community adaptation.[21] Observations were conducted to understand community behavior before, during, and after the flood, including mutual cooperation activities and coping strategies. All data were analyzed using thematic analysis, starting from the coding process, grouping themes, to interpreting meaning based on the relationship between community experiences and cultural context. Data validity was strengthened through triangulation of sources and techniques, as well as confirmation of findings with key informants.[22] This research also pays attention to research ethics, where each informant is given an explanation regarding the purpose of the research, participates voluntarily, and their identity is kept confidential.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Community Cultural Interpretations of Floods

The Lasolo street community interprets flooding as a result of environmental changes resulting from the decline in catchment areas, the reduction of upstream vegetation, and the narrowing of the Lasolo River, influenced by residential development and waste disposal. This interpretation indicates that flooding is not simply a natural occurrence, but rather a consequence of environmental degradation that has occurred over the past two decades. The presence of various ethnic groups, such as Tolaki, Bugis, Muna, and Javanese, does not change the shared perception that human activities contribute to the exacerbation of flood risk. This finding aligns with the environmental determinism perspective, which emphasizes that environmental changes influence community social life.

Furthermore, the community combines local knowledge with modern information to understand flooding. Natural signs such as heavy rainfall, changes in river color, and the ebb and flow of Kendari Bay are still used as references. However, modern information such as rainfall intensity, water discharge, and drainage capacity is beginning to be understood by the community through media and disaster knowledge. This indicates the existence of hybrid knowledge, a combination of traditional knowledge and modern rationality.

Figure 1. Flood victims on Lasolo Street, Sanua sub-district

Community Social Response to Flood Threats

The social response of the Lasolo street community was heavily influenced by the

value of mutual cooperation (gotong royong). When flooding occurred, residents helped each other clean drains, evacuate vulnerable groups, gather supplies, and repair damaged homes. This practice of solidarity reinforces Putnam's findings on the importance of social capital in strengthening community resilience.[23] Social ties, kinship ties, and shared experiences of facing crises are key drivers of collective action.

Local leadership also plays a crucial role. Neighborhood association (or RT) and resident association (or RW) leaders, religious leaders, and community leaders serve as information centers and coordinators for flood management. They mediate residents' needs and communicate directly with the government. This role demonstrates that community-based disaster management relies heavily on the capacity of trusted local leadership.

The community's adaptive response can be seen in the construction of stilt houses, particularly among Bugis and some Tolaki residents. After the 2024 flood, stilt houses were built at higher elevations as a form of mitigation. This adaptation is not only functionally effective but also represents cultural identity. This shows the existence of cultural resilience, namely the ability of culture to be an instrument of survival in the face of environmental threats.

Community Adaptation Strategies for Flooding

Structural adaptations undertaken by communities include raising house elevations, constructing new drainage channels independently, and using more robust building materials. These adaptations are carried out independently without requiring government assistance, indicating an awareness that flooding is a long-term threat.

Meanwhile, non-structural adaptations are demonstrated through increased vigilance during heavy rains, rapid information dissemination through WhatsApp groups, storing essential items in safe places, and strengthening social networks. These strategies build the community's adaptive capacity, which develops naturally based on experience with flooding.

Dynamics of Social Change Due to Floods

Recurring floods create social changes that strengthen community cohesion. Residents begin to see themselves as part of a disaster-resilient community. This collective identity grows from shared experiences facing the threat of flooding.

Furthermore, community risk perceptions have shifted significantly. While previously considered a normal seasonal event, people now associate it with climate change, upstream damage, and unplanned development. This shift in perception aligns with Beck's theory of risk society, which explains that risk is a consequence of the modernization process.[24]

Integrating Findings with Cultural and Disaster Theories

Research findings indicate that cultural meanings, social responses, and adaptation strategies are integral components of community resilience. Based on cultural meaning theory, communities construct meanings about floods that guide their actions. The theory explains that solidarity and mutual cooperation are the main foundations of disaster response. Meanwhile, the community resilience framework demonstrates that adaptation based on local culture strengthens community capacity to cope with flood threats.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that the community of Lasolo street has developed a unique cultural interpretation of the threat of flooding, understanding flooding as a consequence of environmental change, spatial deterioration, and increasing population density. This interpretation shapes the community's way of thinking and behavior in facing disasters. The social response is very strong and is reflected in

the practice of mutual cooperation, kinship solidarity, and the active role of local leaders in organizing evacuations and assisting victims. Cultural factors have also been shown to influence adaptation strategies, including the construction of stilt houses, the use of natural signs as early warnings, and the use of social networks for rapid response when floods occur. These findings indicate that cultural meaning, social response, and community adaptation are interconnected elements that together strengthen community resilience to flood risks. Therefore, disaster management in vulnerable areas such as Lasolo street needs to consider the socio-cultural dynamics that exist within the community.

Declaration by Authors

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