Ethical foundations for peaceful coexistence
A cultural investigation of keselarasan*

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ABSTRACT
Multiculturality and cultural differences are undeniable reality in both Indonesia and the world. Without wisdom such conditions can cause tensions, disputes, and conflicts. For this reason, investigation on the ethical principles contained in keselarasan can provide foundations needed for peaceful coexistence which is crucial in such multicultural conditions as are prevalent in Indonesia. Basic principles such as respect, peace, and empan papan (knowing how to place oneself) are fundamental for living in a multicultural situation. The ethical foundations in keselarasan therefore contribute solutions to manage cultural difference and multiculturalism. These are the basic principles that can help avoid violent social conflict and build peaceful togetherness and dialogue.

KEYWORDS
Keselarasan, ethical foundations, peaceful human coexistence, principle of hormat, rukun, and that of empan papan.

INTRODUCTION
Today cultural diversity and pluralistic communities have become the reality at the workplace in societal life and the world (compare Ernest Gundling and Anita Zanchettin 2007; Carol P. Harvey and M. June Allard 2005). Without wisdom and good basic attitudes, such conditions can lead to conflicts, quarrel and violence (compare M. Ainul Yaqin 2007: v-vi). For this reason, this cultural investigation tries to rediscover foundations for living together in peace and peaceful human coexistence. We use a hermeneutic approach to analyse the

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very rich Javanese concept of *keselarasan*. Hopefully this investigation can contribute a solution to problems emerging from differences in culture and plurality in Indonesian societal life.

*Keselarasan* is central to the Javanese philosophy of life and culture in the sense that the notion of *keselarasan* penetrates Javanese thought patterns, and way of life, and it is profoundly colligated to basic questions such as human existence, ethics, time, identity and communication. This paper focuses on the search for the foundations which are needed to live together in peace. Accordingly I shall first discuss the very rich concept of *keselarasan*, and then I proceed to expose the ethical foundations for peaceful coexistence. Finally I conclude this preliminary cultural investigation with some prospects for further research with regard to the topics discussed.

**The very rich concept of *keselarasan***

*Keselarasan* has its most expressive manifestation in Javanese ethics. Some philosophers even have tended to reduce *keselarasan* to just a principle of ethics (see Magnis-Suseno 1991: 67; Yumarma 1996: 142). Consequently, the meaning of *keselarasan* becomes understood merely as a state of peace and harmony in society so that conflicts and disturbances are avoided (Magnis-Suseno 1991: 71-72). It is true that *keselarasan* has a central place in Javanese ethics. Nevertheless *keselarasan* extends beyond ethics. It has become a pattern of thought which colours the understanding of human life, the world, language, culture, ethics, and so on. We therefore define *keselarasan* as a quality of relationship to which one assigns the characteristics of balance, concordance, avoidance of public conflict and the unified composite of reality as a whole.

This rich comprehension is based on the following considerations. First, the understanding of *keselarasan* cannot be separated from its origin in the ambience of Javanese music, *gamelan*. Magnis-Suseno’s writings lack this perspective. From its origin in the *gamelan*, *keselarasan* implies concord, appropriateness and a unified composition of thought in mystical reflection, the dynamic melody that accompanies events, and more. Thus it is not merely a requisite of ethics which prescribes peace and the avoidance of public conflict, but rather a method of thought which penetrates the heart of Javanese culture. Secondly, *keselarasan* includes the perception of time as circular. The Javanese do not perceive time as linear progression, but on the contrary, as a repetitive sequence of integration and diffusion. The time of *Krta yuga* is the time of integration in which the principle of *keselarasan* reaches its fullness. The time of *Kali yuga* is the time of diffusion in which the principle of *keselarasan* is in distortion, in movement of returning towards its fullness. Between these two poles there is the time of *Treta yuga* and that of *Dvapara yuga*. Together they constitute the rolling wheel which is animated by the principle of *keselarasan*. The positive changes that take place bring back a state of integration, the time of *Krta yuga* which is full of harmony (see Suryomentaram 1989: 48-62; Yumarma 1996: 122).

*Keselarasan* has a remarkable significance for Javanese ethics; however,
to reiterate, keselarasan is more comprehensive. Keselarasan does not only fall within the sphere of ethics, but conversely, Javanese ethics is also subordinate to keselarasan, without which understanding we would fail to understand Javanese ethics. Keeping in mind this comprehension of keselarasan we now look further at Javanese ethics.

Javanese ethics refers to a system of ethics which is akin to the idea of a relationship between an individual and society. This ethics has social and cosmological dimensions in which the world and human existence are considered as interrelated. Before we discuss this relationality, we need to define Javanese ethics.

Javanese ethics is understood as the norms for attitudes and communal customs which exist in Javanese society. “Norm” here refers to a prescript by which Javanese society translates recognized values. On the one hand, the subject of ethics is the Javanese people. On the other hand, the objects are the ethical principles. Thus our discourse is one of reflection on the norms for attitudes and customs as used in Javanese society. It is necessary, then, when we speak of Javanese ethics that we take into account how the Javanese use or live these norms and values in their lives.

According to Magnis-Suseno, the centre of Javanese ethics is the effort to preserve harmony in society and the universe. Harmony guarantees safety and has value in itself (Magnis-Suseno 1984: 96). Such harmony is extant when all the elements of the world, including human beings, are in their proper place. Consequently, the moral duty of a human being is to be conscious of one’s own proper place and to behave according to that proper place. From this perspective, Javanese ethics constitutes a step towards, or a basis for reaching, happiness.

Javanese ethics is termed a wisdom ethics, in which arguments are based on the importance of the human person. Man has the duty to obey the principles which underlie Javanese ethics. Javanese ethics emphasizes concrete, individual attitudes towards society. An individual is asked to adapt to the demands and rules of society (Magnis-Suseno 1984: 227). One example of such a concrete attitude can be seen in gotong royong. Gotong royong is a tradition of working together in order to help each other or to contribute to efforts for the public interest. It takes place when someone builds a house, or organizes a feast, or when a new street for public use has to be constructed, and so on. Several basic thoughts underlie such a tradition. First, there is a consciousness that human life is dependent on one’s neighbours, so that human beings have to maintain good relationships with their neighbours. Second, human beings should help their neighbours. Third, human beings have to adapt themselves to society in such a way that they do not need to display their own capability over others, but should rather have a common attitude toward society (compare Koentjaraningrat 1969: 35; Magnis-Suseno 1984: 51). Consequently, there exists a kind of tension between the individual and society.

The Javanese believe that ethics can be taught. This conviction is evident
in expressions such as kurang ajar! ‘lack of education’ and durung ngerti ‘does not know yet’. Knowing is not merely an intellectual activity but it includes human attitudes and actions, as Wedhatama says: ngelmu iku kelakone kanthi laku knowledge is gained through attitudes and actions or goes together with practice (see Robson 1990: 34). It is for this reason that Wedhatama was written; the purpose of Wedhatama is to offer guidance for attaining morality. According to Robson (1990: 48), Wedhatama etymologically derives from Sanskrit words veda (knowledge or sacred knowledge) and uttana (uppermost, highest, chief). It contains ethical, philosophical and mystical works. The author of Wedhatama is K.G.P.A.A. Mangkunagara IV from the palace of Surakarta (compare Pigeaud 1967: 110). Wedhatama is recognized as the most famous and highly valued product of Javanese literature in the nineteenth century.

Javanese ethics is internalized through acts of politeness, individualization of feeling of isin (shame), sungkan (a state of uncomfortable feelings in expressing the truth with/about others), and wedi (fear) (compare Magnis-Suseno 1984: 147-148). Language and wayang performances become the media for the transmission of Javanese ethics. The possibility of teaching ethics is based on the apprehensibility of knowledge which goes together with practice. With this in mind, we shall identify the principles of Javanese ethics in the following section.

Ethical foundations for peaceful coexistence
As mentioned above, keselarasan necessarily includes ethical guideline for peaceful coexistence in society. Those guidelines are the principles of hormat (respect), rukun (peace) and empan papan (know how to place oneself) (see Yumarma 1996: 146). Hereafter I shall discuss these principles which are nurtured from early childhood in the traditional family.

The principle of hormat
Hormat is the principle which pertains to the norm for relationships among people in Javanese society. It is defined as the obligation for every member of society to show an attitude of respect. The expressions of respect depend on someone’s position as superior or subordinate to counterpart. As superior she/he will give advice, direction, care, and protection to subordinates in Javanese ngoko language. Conversely, as subordinate she/he will express an attitude of respect in a form of obedience to the elders or superiors. She/he usually uses krama language to the elders or superiors. The principle of hormat, therefore, indicates a model of Javanese communication. It necessarily includes knowledge on the status and position of the counterpart, and intuition as a kind of awareness towards self and others that influences the usage of the chosen words and language level.

The principle of hormat in Javanese society predicates a moral world characterized by mutual obligations. These obligations are not equally distributed, as they provide for the existence of a hierarchy in which there is an obligation for some to guide and lead the others. This is manifested in
respect for one’s superiors, as Mulder (1994: 48) says: “Elders, teachers and especially parents are the subject of extreme reverence, of worship (pepunden), a place that they deserve because of their care, protection, and teaching.”

The high status of parents and elders is based on the Javanese order in the family. Parents become the representatives of life because they connect life to life by marriage and by having children. They have a duty to beget and rear the children until these get married and take on the task of continuing the life line. Consequently, parents become the source of restu ’recognition and blessing’ (Mulder 1985: 28).

It is morally wrong if children do not respect their parents, do not listen to their advice, or even hurt their feelings. The primacy of parents and elders is the best assurance for preserving the right order of relationship in Javanese society. Hence Javanese ethics gives rise to humility and respect for the feelings of others. The children, thus, have to respect and obey their parents or use the Javanese expression, ngajeni. When Javanese marry, they receive the name wis mentas ‘already well provided for’, meaning that they have become independent from their parents and have become ready to continue life on their own.

The principle of hormat is transmitted through the feelings of wedi, isin, and sungkan. Wedi is a feeling of fear toward those who are stronger or menacing. Isin is a feeling of shame, which is oriented more toward oneself. Sungkan is a kind of uncomfortable feeling in front of a superior which is a very subtle control of self for reasons of respect for others. Consequently, it might happen that someone does not express the truth because of sungkan. Javanese children begin to learn the principle of hormat in the family, through forms of politeness and Javanese language, especially when the situation demands that they show an attitude of respect. Consequently, it is not enough to know the principle of hormat, but the Javanese have to demonstrate their knowledge of hormat to elders and superiors.

The individualization of the principle of hormat constitutes a mentality found in state officers, governors, the army and those who are members of the middle class. Such a mentality is characterized by a tendency of orientation to the behaviour of the leader. The leaders, such as those who have a higher rank or who are older, must be served and widely respected. The inferiors feel that they are respectful when they can give small presents, and those who are in the upper hierarchy (atasan) listen to them, protect them and give them moral guidance. Superiors take into account the dedication and loyalty of subordinates (Magnis-Suseno 1984: 66).

The upper class or elder people are expected to know or be aware of what the lower class thinks and feels. The figure of atasan as protector (pengayom) means that the leaders or members of the upper class listen to and understand the needs of the lower class. In response, the lower class obeys them and treats them with full respect. The failure of being pengayom brings about dissatisfaction, indifference or even disobedience.

An attitude of hormat, however, is not a guarantee for obedience. The
word “yes” might merely be an expression of hormat, which can mean “I do agree,” or “perhaps” or “no” in a respectful way. The subordinate learns that obedience to authority is useful, but it does not mean that one willingly performs the demands of those who are in authority.

The leader becomes a figure like a father (bapak) who offers protection and kindles a feeling of faith and dependence. Such a person who is attentive to the lower class will gain respect as their leader. This principle of hormat brings about a hierarchical relationship between the leader and his/her followers, so that their relationship becomes a relationship of status oriented toward the leader. This vertical relationship is considered to contribute to stability and continuity, but on the negative side, it has a strong tendency to create authoritarian leadership (Mulder 1985: 59).

There are differences between relationships of intimacy (keakraban) and relationships based on hormat. A Javanese will feel comfortable and secure when free from the obligation of observing hormat. A relationship of closeness, moreover, creates a space in which an individual can live in a relaxed and free state, free from the demands of order or politeness.

According to Javanese thought, the principle of hormat is important for preserving a good and peaceful order. Social life appears as a condition in which individuals behave according to their status and rights. For this reason, it is not impossible that an individual’s status is equivalent to one’s identity in Javanese society. Accordingly, one shows the dignity of his status or one becomes demanding of respect from others, especially from the lower class.

The principle of hormat functions in a hierarchical framework in which aspiration, order and protection come from those above to those below (Mulder 1985: 159). In such a framework, position or status is followed by tasks and duties according to one’s position and place in society. Therefore one is never separated from the duties of one’s status in the whole hierarchical order in which some have to lead and some have to obey. If all act according to their own place in such an order, the whole order will be well preserved and all persons will be respected according to their status. The transmission of this principle is also supported by language and the hierarchical social structure. That is why this principle is so strong in Javanese society and such an important element in Javanese ethics. However, the existence of a hierarchical order cannot be free from criticism. Javanese society also has experienced changes and improvements resulting from wider communication and the influence of modernization. Examples are criticisms against the subordination of women to men in Javanese society, and against the too strong demand of respect from the lower people and the extreme status orientedness. The subordinated position of a wife to her husband and in general of women to men has become more equal. Demand of respect from subordinates and status orientedness have changed to become a spirit of public service and mutual trust, as seen in the motto tahta untuk rakyat (a thrown for the people) in the Yogyakarta Palace of the Sultan, and his support for cultural creative industry and development of traditional markets. These empower the common people or the lower class
to survive together, especially when they have to cope with unpredictable natural disasters.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RUKUN

The principle of rukun signifies the Javanese conviction of the importance of a tranquil and peaceful state in society. The word rukun implies unity through collaboration, in order to help one another without quarrel or conflict. Such collaboration takes place when all people in society live in peaceful coexistence and when they like to collaborate and to accept one another in a situation of tranquillity and understanding. In families, villages and society at large, the principle of rukun is preserved and performed through tradition, customs, and forms of socialization.

The principle of rukun can be viewed from two perspectives, namely, imperative and indicative. As an imperative, the principle of rukun means that everyone should observe rukun, so that all members of society try to avoid the seeds of tension among individuals and groups in a community. In other words, every member of society has an obligation to create a good relationship with others and to be involved in a good social life. In this perspective, rukun demands continuous efforts to avoid or omit those elements which may cause conflicts and disturbances (Magnis-Suseno 1984: 39). Society, therefore, must preserve itself from any disturbance which distorts the principle of rukun. In other words, the principle of rukun demands attitudes and actions that foster peace and tranquillity of society.

As an indicative, the principle of rukun denotes a state of social harmony which has existed for centuries as a norm for organizing the whole of society. Such social harmony must be protected. The emphasis on harmony in society brings about demands for behaving in a general way (umum) and an obligation to protect peaceful relationships and togetherness. For this reason everyone in Javanese society becomes a protector of peace and tranquillity. Consequently, in the application or practice of rukun the individuals put aside their own interests and have a preferential option for public interests. An individual is considered unworthy if that individual improves too much beyond the common state of society.

These imperative and indicative perspectives have to be seen as two aspects of the principle of rukun. According to this principle the individual acts together with society or a social group. Accordingly, the individual is considered as bad when he takes initiatives without taking into account the collectivity of society. Society does not easily accept initiatives which are strikingly different from common pursuits. It is an assumption of Javanese people that such initiatives tend to be outside of the public interest which has been integrated in society, and that these new extremes may easily cause quarrels and conflicts.

A solution of conflicts takes place through action according to the norms of behaviour and through public concessions which protect social harmony from emotional explosions or public conflict. Consequently, Javanese society
demands self-reflection (mawas diri) and the capacity to control emotions and feelings. The figure of a noble person, therefore, can be seen from one’s skill of self-control and the capacity to be calm, and to not easily become nervous, confused, or surprised in dealing with anything.

The core of the principle of rukun demands the avoidance of any attitude bringing about a public conflict. Hence the result of the state of rukun (peace) is social harmony in which everyone lives peacefully with each other. The fact that rukun is like a social mechanism which integrates various interests, does not imply that a Javanese has no personal interests. It does mean that by the preferential option for the public interests, an individual also receives social protection which enables him to have a peaceful mind and life and so to improve his personal fate. Nevertheless, one has acquiescence to compromise and to prevent the disruption of social harmony. It must be noted that the idea of rukun contains a balance of positions, statuses, tasks, duties and a mutuality of “give and take,” which creates a hierarchical order of life. The hierarchical order of life in society must be respected as a moral demand in itself.

The ideal society is described as a society which is governed by the principle of rukun. In such a state, peace becomes characteristic for the vertical and horizontal relationships in Javanese society. Nevertheless, such an ideal society sometimes has to face the fact of conflict and the danger of division. In order to reach the state of peace, it is not right to bring to light personal affairs. In addition, everyone makes an effort to be sensitive to the feelings of others or, in the Javanese expression, tepa selira (see also Mulder 1992: 48, 54). The content of tepa selira is similar to the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Thus the ideal Javanese society demands self-control, self-reflection and control of feelings for the sake of others. The negative consequence is the pressure towards the development of a moral heteronomy. In other words, there is a danger that social considerations and peer pressure can give rise to a tension between moral autonomy and moral heteronomy. This is evident in the hierarchical structure of the Javanese society.

We will deal further with the hierarchical social order of life in discussing the principle of empan papan. Here suffice it to say that the practice of the principle of rukun is a constituent part of the structure of Javanese society, and this is why the principle of rukun becomes noteworthy in Javanese ethics. The acquiescence of people in making compromises, public concessions, deliberations and common agreements is nurtured by the power of the principle of rukun which is in turn propagated through the structure of society, social tradition and customs.

Politeness, which is called tata krama in Javanese, facilitates the observance of rukun. This politeness includes the way of speaking, sitting, gesturing and the content of discourse, through which the Javanese train themselves to control their emotions, attitudes and consciousness of the position of the other. Accordingly, a person feels that his existence depends upon the unity within society or the group in which one can feel secure, safe and peaceful. Javanese
experience social and psychological pressure when they are in confrontation with the common norms of society. They also feel shame and guilt when their attitudes disturb the state of peace in society. In addition, Javanese society also demands the attitude of rukun and will punish an unsuitable attitude by isolation or the disqualifying designation of ora umum (uncommon).

Members of Javanese society try to behave according to rukun by encouraging good relationships, social forms of give and take, and compromise and the spontaneous sacrifice of one’s own interests for the sake of common prosperity and solidarity. Such efforts create peace of heart and consciousness of one’s mutual dependence. Consequently, peaceful relationships, mutual respect and understanding, and an adaptable attitude toward society are reasonable, because these duties and established values are appreciated.

The principle of empan papan

The principle of empan papan (know how to place oneself) necessarily implies a consciousness of one’s position or place in society. One’s place indicates a social status and the existence of a social structure. The context of one’s status or position, which is manifested in various kinds of cultural expression, language and moral behaviour, is this social structure. The principle of empan papan will be examined in the light of this hierarchical order in Javanese society.

It is important to note that the hierarchical order is distinctive. Geertz (1989: 6-9) divides Javanese society into three groups: abangan, santri and priyayi. Abangan is defined as that group of society which is characterized by an amalgamation of animism, Hinduism, and Islam. The popular tradition of syncretism is the main basis of its civilization. In other words, abangan emphasizes the elements of animism and syncretism which distinguish both urban inhabitants and farmers. The second group that Geertz names santri, is a group which has an Islamic tradition and also a wide network of trade throughout the whole island of Java. The tradition of santri includes the practice of the Islamic religion such as prayer, fasting, and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca). In addition to this, they are also involved in social and political organizations. Most of them are involved in society as Islamic traders. The third distinct group is priyayi which has its roots in the Hindu-Javanese kingdom and has connections with the bureaucracy. They preserve and improve the art, literature, mysticism and etiquette of the kingdom. The elements of Hinduism are outstanding in this group. This group has contributed a view of the world with its ethical and social behaviour which has become the model of the elite class and most of society.

These three groups constitute an interesting comprehension of the structures of Javanese society. Geertz’ approach is based on research during the years 1953-1954 at “Modjokuto” (Modjokerto), East Java, with its 200,000 inhabitants (Bachtiar 1989: 521). However, Geertz overlooked the fact that the priyayi can be also santri at the same time, so that in fact there is no sharp dividing line between priyayi and santri. Nevertheless, his study has shed light upon and contributed to the comprehension of the social structure of Javanese
society. It represents a collection of rights and duties (Palmier 1969: 10). Status is legitimized power because status in a certain sense also preserves and gives power; or reversely, power dictates status. In this perspective, the principle of *empan papan* becomes a norm for placing oneself among others within the whole of society. The ability to place oneself among others engenders security and safety. Accordingly, those who place themselves well are accepted and protected by society, as their presence will not be perceived as a threat.

The Javanese assessment of status hinges on two elements, namely, descent and position. First, status can be explained from the perspectives of feudal nobility in which the position in society held by a parent is inherited by the children (see Palmier 1969: 4). Nevertheless, Javanese kinship is bilateral so that there is a balanced kinship of both families, that of the mother and that of the father. Thus the family of the mother and that of the father are in the same position with regard to the child. Secondly, status comes from the position which one has reached by personal efforts or the efforts of a group outside the descendant’s line. This second factor has become stronger since the independence of Indonesia in 1945.

According to Magnis-Suseno, the understanding of one’s position in society (*empan papan*) is not separated from the Javanese view of the world, which universally connects events in the world with the mysterious powers of the universe (Magnis-Suseno 1984: 93-97). The understanding of one’s proper place has great significance for the Javanese, because the safety of a human being also depends upon how he finds his proper place and acts according to it. Hence, individuals can fulfil their desires and interests and attain their hopes by their own efforts, in accordance with one’s rightful status.

The principle of *empan papan* is intended to protect the state of social harmony. It is based on the assumption that if everyone places himself according to his own proper position in the cosmos, there will not be any clash of powers which disturbs social harmony. Social harmony manifests itself in tranquillity, a peaceful state and a situation of order. Such a state becomes a sign that there are no disturbances of social harmony.

Emotional tension, the absence of a peaceful mind and disturbances of social harmony cause mysterious cosmic waves in the whole society which bring about unpredictable dangers. That is why together with the principle of *rukun*, the principle of *empan papan* governs the avoidance of any disturbance of social harmony so that conflicts do not appear openly or in public. Expressed in another way, the principle of *empan papan* implies the recognition of a proper place for every person.

**Conclusion**

As a conclusion, it suffices to say that the rediscovery of local wisdom such as *keselarasan* contributes ethical foundations for human coexistence and living together in peace. These preliminary contributions have a very important prospect for further research and investigation, especially when it is implemented in the recent societal practice of human rights such as education,
gender equality, and women advocacy. In the era of globalization and that of multi-national corporations, this is a challenge that should be considered by everyone in society.

Criticism on the position of women as subordinate to men in the Javanese hierarchical structure has led to improvements in their position and to more equality. Democracy and social dynamics have also produced a new awareness on the part of women towards both human rights and their rights as women. Accordingly, it has created wider opportunities for them in economic and social life, and even in politics. Regarding the hierarchical structure in the principles of hormat, rukun, and empan papan, women have achieved a higher status in society. Change and improvement take place in a dynamic tension of keselarasan which is coloured by diffusion and integration that finally creates movements towards a state of concord, balance and a unified composite as a whole.

Last but not least, without neglecting the negative sides it can be claimed that the three principles of hormat (respect), rukun (peace), and empan papan (know how to place oneself) in keselarasan are still relevant as an alternative guideline in our changing society. Respect and knowing how to place oneself are necessary in facing pluralism, cultural diversity, dialogue, and interrelatedness among peoples and nations in our time. The principle of rukun is certainly needed to handle social insecurity, disintegration and to prevent various ethnic conflicts that recently have been happening in our recent society.

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