

## "SELAMETAN TOLAK BALA" AS COPING STRATEGY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



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### Abstract

*Selamatan tolak bala* is a ritual that Javanese people usually do during the pagebluk period. During the current Covid – 19 pandemic, some people still carry out this ritual. This study seeks to examine from a psychological point of view why the ritual is still carried amid restrictions on community activities. This research was conducted by literature review method using sources from books, previous research, articles from mass media and website pages, aiming to collect theories and pieces of information relevant to the topics studied in this research. The results of this research are *selamatan tolak bala* could be a form of problem – focused coping if the practitioners believed that this ritual could stop the outbreak. It could be a form of emotional – focused coping if the practitioners believed that this ritual is done to eliminate the anxiety. As Javanese local wisdom, whatever the meaning coping strategies, *selamatan tolak bala* could be one of the efforts in dealing with the Covid – 19 pandemic, especially in reducing anxiety levels. Therefore it had to be done by enforcing strict health protocols to avoid the possibility of increasing positive cases of Covid – 19 after the ritual implementation, which thwarts the ritual's purpose.

### Abstrak

*Selamatan tolak bala* merupakan ritual yang biasa dilakukan masyarakat Jawa pada masa pagebluk. Pada masa pandemi Covid-19, ritual tersebut masih dilaksanakan oleh sebagian masyarakat. Penelitian ini mengkaji dari sudut pandang psikologi alasan yang mendasari *selamatan tolak bala* masih dilakukan meski di tengah-tengah pembatasan kegiatan masyarakat oleh pemerintah. Penelitian ini dilakukan dengan memakai metode literature review terhadap buku-buku, jurnal-jurnal penelitian, maupun artikel media massa dan laman situs web. Penelitian ini mengungkap bahwa *selamatan tolak bala* dapat menjadi bentuk strategi problem-focused coping jika dipersepsikan oleh pelakunya; bahwasanya ritual ini justru dianggap dapat menghentikan wabah yang terjadi. Pandangan ini menjadi sebuah bentuk strategi emotional-focused coping yang dilakukan untuk memberi rasa tenang dan menghilangkan kecemasan yang masyarakat tersebut rasakan. Sebagai salah satu bentuk kearifan lokal masyarakat Jawa, apapun pemaknaannya dalam konteks strategi coping, "*selamatan tolak bala*" dapat menjadi salah satu upaya dalam menghadapi pandemi Covid-19, terutama dalam menurunkan tingkat kecemasan masyarakat. Tentunya, dengan tetap memberlakukan protokol kesehatan yang ketat untuk menghindari kemungkinan terjadinya peningkatan jumlah kasus positif Covid-19 pascapelaksanaan ritual—yang mana justru dapat menggagalkan tujuan ritual tersebut.

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian people, especially the Javanese, are known for having a variety of cultures, including those in the form of rituals, where these rituals have been passed down from generation to generation long ago, regardless of whatever religion the Javanese people adhered to that time. One ritual that is quite identical to Javanese



society is the *selamatan*. According to Natsir, *selamatan* refers to a broad communal prayer, feast, and food offering to commemorate or celebrate critical life cycles, such as birth, marriage, and death, and constitutes an essential ritual for Javanese (Nasir, 2019). Due to its special meaning to the Javanese people, van den Boogert states that *selamatan* is such an important ritual that it is at the very heart of the religious life of the Javanese people (van den Boogert, 2017). The Javanese people have routinely performed the rituals for various purposes. One of them is for *tolak bala* or to drive away any form of calamity.

During the Covid–19 pandemic, some Javanese people in several areas still carry out the ritual of *selamatan tolak bala*. For example, what was done by the Javanese community in several areas in East Java Province, such as in Tuban Regency (Huda, 2021), Jember Regency (Wahyunik, 2021), Ngawi Regency (Fatimah, 2021), Banyuwangi Regency (Fanani, 2020), and Bondowoso Regency (Bahri, 2021). The ritual is generally carried out with the hope of being free from the Covid–19 pandemic situation that has occurs in the last three years. In the midst of imposing restrictions on community activities by the government as a measure to prevent the widening of the spread of the Covid–19 virus, whether it's PSBB (*Pembatasan sosial berskala besar*/Large–scale social restrictions) or PPKM (*Pemberlakuan pembatasan kegiatan masyarakat*/imposition of restrictions on community activities), it is certainly interesting to study why the community still holds the rituals that are usually carried out together.

This research uses the literature study method by studying literature sources such as books, previous research journals, as well as articles from the mass media and website pages to gather theory and information relevant to the topic studied in this research, i.e., the *selamatan tolak bala* and stress coping. According to Fink, literature study is a systematic, explicit or comprehensive method and reproducible in identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing parts of research that is completed or recorded as the work of researchers, scholars and practitioners (Okoli, 2015). By using a literature study, researchers are expected to be able to obtain correct and appropriate data so that the results of this study can be accounted for from a scientific point of view.

Several previous studies about *selamatan tolak bala* during the Covid–19 pandemic have focused more on aspects of ritual and culture (Alkaf et al., 2021; Lestari et al., 2022) as well as aspects of health protocols (Addina et al., 2020). So in this study, researchers using the psychology perspective, especially in the field study of coping stress as a way to explain the reasons why the Javanese people are still carrying out the ritual of *selamatan tolak bala* in the current conditions of the Covid–19 pandemic. Thus the results of this study are expected to become a source of information regarding studies in psychology, culture, and health studies. In addition, it is also hoped that the results of this research can become a source of information for the government as the policyholder in implementing regulations or policies related to handling pandemic situations while still paying attention to local wisdom in the future.

## **SELAMETAN TOLAK BALA IN THE MIDST OF COVID-19**

*Selamatan* or *selamatan*, according to Geertz, is a form of religious ritual in the form of a communal banquet party by the Javanese people, which symbolizes the existence of mystical and social unity in all the elements involved in the ritual, as is the case with communal banquets in general in other parts of the world. These elements include friends, neighbors, co–workers, relatives, local guardian spirits, or ancestral spirits

(Geertz, 1960). Meanwhile, Setiawati states that the *selamatan* is the result of syncretism between various cultures, including animism, Hindu – Buddhism, and Islam so that there is a combination of cultural, mythical and religious elements in the ritual. It can be seen in the habits practiced by the Javanese people, who always combine traditional practices with religious law, as seen in the *selamatan* ritual (Setiawati, 2019).

Meanwhile, Beatty suggests that *selamatan* comes from the word *slamet*, taken from the Javanese word, meaning safe. The purpose of the *selamatan* is to create conditions that are prosperous, safe, serene, and free from disturbances. This situation is what the Javanese usually call *slamet* (Nurul Qolbi Kurniaawati, 2021). Kurniaawati adds that in the *selamatan* ritual, what is important is not only the prayer said during the ritual, but the dish prepared in the form of food that is given and distributed to the family and neighbors who are present at the ritual where the dish is a representation of almsgiving in religious teachings Islam. By giving this, it is hoped that the owner of the *hajat* or wish will get blessings and safety (Nurul Qolbi Kurniaawati, 2021)

In terms of its purpose, Geertz states that the *selamatan* can be used as a form of celebration, repair, or purification of various life events, from births, marriages, witchcraft, death, moving house, nightmares, harvests, changing names, business inauguration, illness, requests to village guards, circumcisions, or political meetings (Geertz, 1960). So it can be seen that the *selamatan* is a cultural ritual that is not specific to the Javanese for a specific purpose alone but covers all aspects of the life cycle of the Javanese people from birth to death, in a state of happiness or distress. Meanwhile, according to Kholil *selamatan* usually aims to create a state that is prosperous, safe, and free from disturbances by creatures, both real creatures and also spirits or ghost (Kholil, 2008).

So it can be concluded that the *selamatan* is a form of ritual resulting from syncretism from animism, Hindu – Buddhist, to Islamic culture, which is carried out from generation to generation by the Javanese people in the form of rituals in the form of praying and eating together with their surroundings to be an expression of gratitude for experienced life events, as a hope to be given blessings and prosperity, and as a form of prayer to be given safety from disturbances and troubles.

Concerning avoiding disturbances and troubles, the Indonesian people have long been familiar with the concept of *tolak bala*. *Tolak bala* is an action carried out by people both individually and by a group of people to free themselves from the evil influences they believe are around them (Warisan Budaya Takbenda Indonesia, 2011). The Javanese people have certain rituals, including salvation or slametans, to prevent the community from disasters or the effects that occur as a result of these disasters. The disaster can be in the form of natural disasters such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, crop failure due to persistent drought, or disease outbreaks commonly known as *pagebluk*.

According to Pratista, *pagebluk*, both in Javanese and Sundanese, comes from the word "*gebluk*" or "*bluk*" which can mean the condition of falling or it can also be referred to as an explosion. So that *pagebluk* can be interpreted as a description of a condition that occurs simultaneously and on a large scale in which many victims fall, and by the magnitude of this, it resembles the meaning of the word "*gebluk*", which is an explosion. Thus, it can be concluded that *pagebluk* is a local meaning of the term pandemic (Pratista, 2020). Let us look at the conditions of a pandemic or disease outbreak due to the worldwide spread of the Covid – 19 virus. It is only natural that

people, especially the Javanese, regard this Covid–19 pandemic as a *pagebluk*. This was because, during this pandemic, many people were seriously ill and even died in a relatively short time because of getting infected by the covid 19 virus.

In dealing with the Covid–19 pandemic, various efforts have been made by both the government and the general public. Suppose the government seeks various policies in dealing with the situation of the spread of the Covid–19 virus, such as the implementation of PSBB (*Pembatasan sosial berskala besar*/Large–scale social restrictions) and PPKM (*Pemberlakuan pembatasan kegiatan masyarakat*/imposition of restrictions on community activities) to inhibit the rate of spread of the virus, campaigns for implementing health protocols, administering Covid–19 vaccinations, and providing health services integrated both for hospitalization and independent isolation for members of the public who are infected with the Covid–19 virus. Meanwhile, in addition to making efforts for the general public by implementing health protocols following established government policies, some carry out rituals according to traditions trusted by the local community for generations in dealing with situations like this.

For some Javanese people who still carry out their cultural ritual traditions, *selamatan tolak bala* is one of the efforts carried out during the Covid–19 pandemic. For example, what was done by the people of Rejuno Village, Karangjati District, Ngawi Regency, at the beginning of August 2021? According to the village head, the ritual is a tradition from the ancestors as a mutual effort to ask God Almighty to avoid disease outbreaks, especially Covid–19, and to keep away or be fenced off from various types of diseases, epidemics (*pagebluk*), and disasters that have occurred everywhere (Fatimah, 2021).

Similarly, the Javanese people in the Bondowoso area also hold a similar ritual: *serabi* and *ketupat* ceremony (Bahri, 2021). *Serabi* is a Javanese or Balinese traditional rice pancake. *Ketupat* is a rice cake wrapped in a diamond–shaped woven palm leaf pouch and boiled. The ritual is carried out by each house providing *serabi* and *ketupat* with the number of each *serabi* and *ketupat* following the number of persons in each house. Then the food is collected in one of the prayer rooms and placed on a tray to be prayed for by the *Ustad*, Koran teacher or local religious figure. After the prayers had finished, the *serabi* and *ketupat* were distributed back to the community members, each receiving a *serabi* and a *ketupat*. By eating *serabi* and *ketupat* that have gone through the ritual process, the community believes that with God's permission, they will be kept away from disease (Bahri, 2021).

Lestari, Waliyah, and Shofa also stated that the people of Ampelgading District, Malang Regency, carried out a similar ritual. What distinguishes it from rituals in other areas is the existence of special provisions that must be considered in the *selamatan* of *ketupat* and *serabi*, that the community must make seven *ketupat* and *serabi* for each house. In addition, there are differences in the form of prayer ritual activities that are carried out; these prayer rituals do not have to be carried out together at the local mosque or prayer room but can also be carried out at each other's homes with the consideration that they can still carry out health protocols in the form of minimizing activities that gather many people (Lestari et al., 2022).

The pandemic situation is known to influence people's mental health. According to Snowden, epidemic disease outbreaks can cause anxiety and spread terror in society (Sukmawati, 2022). Xiong, et al. found there were relatively high rates of symptoms of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, PTSD (post–traumatic stress

disorder, psychological distress, and stress in the general population during the Covid – 19 pandemic in several countries, i.e., China, Spain, Italy, Iran, the US, Turkey, Nepal, and Denmark (Xiong et al., 2020). Murtiwidayanti & Ikawati also found that the Covid – 19 pandemic situation in Indonesia had caused anxiety in terms of psychological conditions in reciprocal and one – way social situations, or physical conditions in reciprocal and one – way social situations (Murtiwidayanti & Ikawati, 2021). So the Covid – 19 pandemic can become a separate form of a stressor for the community, triggering the emergence of anxiety. These stressors can be in the form of the fear of getting an infection, quarantine, isolation, death, losing our loved ones, and lockdown restrictions (Gupta & Nebhinani, 2020).

In the conditions of the Covid – 19 pandemic, if stress conditions cannot be handled properly, it can impact one's health, especially immunity. Aldwin stated that stress's impact on immunity really depends on the intensity and duration of the stressor itself. Short – term stress stimulation, for example, in a laboratory setting, may enhance or stimulate immune function. However, acute stressors, such as exams, suppress various immune functions. S chronic stress conditions will have the deepest and most long – lasting effects (compared to milder stress conditions)(Aldwin, 2007). Research conducted by Glaser et al. found that being in a state of immunosuppression can last for a long time even when the stress itself has long ended (Aldwin, 2007).

In dealing with conditions that cause stress, individuals usually cope as a form of response to the stress they experience. Lazarus and Folkman define coping as a form of effort that is carried out constantly and continuously changing, both in terms of behavior and cognitive, to manage the demands that arise both from outside and from within the individual, in which these demands are considered to be burdensome or exceed the resources they have (Lazarus, Richard S & Folkman, 1984). Aldwin states that coping is the use of strategies to deal with problems, both actual and future problems, and the negative emotions that accompany them. While individuals may actively try to deal with the problems they experience, their emotional responses and the selection of strategies for dealing with these problems may only sometimes be fully realized. The social and cultural environment can influence a person's assessment of stressful conditions and the use of coping strategies, either directly or indirectly (Aldwin, 2007).

Folkman & Lazarus states that there are two ways of coping strategies. These strategies include problem – solving coping and emotionally focused coping. Problem – solving coping is a form of coping strategy that aims to make real efforts to resolve situations or conditions that are stressful, threatening, and challenging for individuals. Meanwhile, emotional – focused coping is a strategy that involves efforts made to manage the emotional consequences of an event that causes stress (Taylor, 2015).

In the context of the coping strategy, *selamatan tolak bala* could be considered a Javanese local wisdom coping strategy in dealing with the pandemic. As Javanese people believe that *selamatan* can save people from disasters(Agustha et al., 2021). It was found that *selamatan*, implemented by traditional communities, can provide immunity and comfort for the region's people (Agustha et al., 2021). Since there are coping strategies, *selamatan* could be considered both ways.

*Selamatan tolak bala* could be interpreted as a problem – solving coping strategy if the people performing the ritual believe that the ritual they are doing can stop disease outbreaks. It is because many members of the Javanese people believe that *selamatan tolak bala*, with the permission of God Almighty, is a form of effort to eliminate disease outbreaks apart from, of course, other efforts from a medical point of view. For example,

some Bondowoso Regency residents believe that the ritual of *selamatan serabi* and *ketupat* by praying together while giving *serabi* and *ketupat* or that have been prayed for can prevent all kinds of diseases, including the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Apart from that, providing food in the form of *ketupat* and *serabi* as a form of charity is believed to prevent disaster or bad events (Bahri, 2021). Some residents of Ngawi Regency also did the same thing. Due to a tense situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, they performed the *selamatan tolak bala*, which is believed to make the covid-19 outbreak disappear. The ritual, which is a hereditary tradition according to the residents, is a form of embodiment of *ilmu titun* from the ancestors that the check-in ceremony accompanied by prayer is expected to get rid of the plague that is befalling the community (Fatimah, 2021).

Apart from that, *Selamatan tolak bala* can also be interpreted as a form of emotional focus coping strategy. This interpretation can be caused if doing the ritual will eliminate the anxiety experienced by the community. As with other sources of stress, disease outbreaks can have an emotional impact. Hanif states that by carrying out the ritual of *tolak bala*, one of which is *selamatan*, in addition to making people feel confident and optimistic that the covid-19 pandemic can be prevented, the community can also feel that the fear, anxiety and panic felt during the pandemic can be reduced. Another impact is that apart from an increased sense of optimism (about the end of the pandemic), people feel that the immune system in the body is getting better (Hanif, 2021). Alkaf et al. also stated that *selamatan tolak bala*, as a form of prayer and a ritual asking for safety, is a legacy of local wisdom from the local Javanese community as an effort to deal with anxiety and fear due to the covid-19 pandemic situation (Alkaf et al., 2021). With the disappearance of anxiety and the emergence of a sense of calm and optimism in the community, the community can carry out other forms of coping strategies in dealing with the conditions of the covid-19 pandemic, which might be difficult to do if the community is still in a state of anxiety.

## CONCLUSION

Pandemic situations such as the Covid-19 pandemic that we have experienced for the past three years have proven to be a strong source of stress for people. Whether it's the fear of the disease effects or the unpleasant situations that must be experienced during the pandemic, for this reason, *selamatan tolak bala* for the Javanese people who practice it becomes some coping strategy implemented in dealing with this situation.

As coping strategy, *selamatan tolak bala* can have a double meaning for ritual practitioners. It could have meaning of a problem-focused coping strategy if the ritual practitioners believe that *selamatan tolak bala* as a form of prayer can eliminate an outbreak or, in this case, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. It can also have the meaning as a form of emotional-focused coping strategy, especially if performing the ritual can help reduce the anxiety and fear that most practitioners of the ritual had been experiencing during the covid-19 pandemic.

As a form of local wisdom for the Javanese people, regardless of its meaning in the context of a coping strategy, *selamatan tolak bala* can be an effort to deal with the covid-19 pandemic situation, especially in reducing the level of public anxiety and thus improve people's level of immunity. Of course, the implementation must prioritize the implementation of health protocols such as using face masks for all ritual participants, limiting the number of ritual participants, maintaining safe distance

between ritual participants, carrying out rituals in open spaces, and not eating together in public places.

By implementing strict health protocols the risk of transmission of the Covid – 19 virus can be minimized. The ritual aims to create a sense of peace for the community members performing the ritual, and disease outbreaks can disappear. On the other hand, if the ritual is still carried out by ignoring health protocols, then the risk of transmission of the Covid – 19 virus may occur or even increase after the ritual is carried out. If this happens, the objective of *selamatan tolak bala* will not be achieved because there is an increase in the number of positive cases of Covid – 19, which can prolong or worsen the situation of the pandemic.

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