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## **THE LONGING FOR THE BELOVED: MYSTICAL JOURNEY BEHIND THE HOMECOMING TRADITION ON EID AL-FITR IN INDONESIA AND SONGKRAN IN THAILAND**

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### **Abstract**

On the day of Eid al-Fitr and Songkran celebration, massive exodus from big cities such as Jakarta and Bangkok to rural areas in Indonesia and Thailand takes place as people wish to celebrate the tradition with the loved ones at home. Hence, this mass departure turns the capital into a temporary desolate city. This paper aimed at unveiling the symbolic meaning behind the largest annual homecoming of family reunion in Indonesia and Thailand to observe Eid al-Fitr and Songkran feast. This qualitative research examined the symbolisms in these two most-celebrated festivals in Indonesia and Thailand calendar that breathe similarity with Sufi (Islamic mysticism) imagery. By applying hermeneutic approach specifically of Paul Ricoeur as theoretical concept, the finding shows that the main symbolism in Eid al-Fitr and Songkran, the homecoming, demonstrates the core symbolism in Sufi tradition. This symbol is a metaphor of union or invitation for union with the beloved as the ultimate point in Sufi tradition.

**Keywords:** Eid al- Fitr, Songkran, homecoming, symbolism, the beloved, union.

### **Introduction**

*There is no love  
but for the First Friend  
whose naked glory you hide  
under hundreds of veils-Annemarie Schimmel*

Once in a year in Indonesia and Thailand, there is an exodus of homecoming that celebrated nationwide to observe the biggest festival in the two countries: Eid al- Fitr and Songkran. This annual people mass departure has always turned the bigger cities in the two countries into a temporary deserted city. Indonesian and Thai people who originally are not the native residents in the cities will travel to their hometowns to visit their parents or relatives and celebrate the tradition.

These two celebrations, regardless of the differences in its ritual form breathe commonality that carries the fragrance of humanity. It is therefore worth remembering that despite of the region and religion, there is a fundamental

similarity to celebrate different festivals in human cultural expression. Similarity is essential as the thing that leads to intercultural understanding is similarities than differences (Samover, 2000).

This study argued that the commonality between the two traditions, the affectionate longing in the heart of Indonesian and Thai people to go home and reunite with their loved ones symbolizing the core symbolism in Sufi tradition. Indonesian and Thai people yearn to reunite to their core origin or with the people they love is a symbol of their yearning to something bigger. This yearning will lead them to move forward to God. As everything that people cherish in this world is just a veil or a ladder that will lead them closer to God. Hence, there is a saying that “human love is called metaphorical love in contrast to the pure, true, Divine love. Love of human being is the ladder leading to the love of the Merciful” (Schimmel, 1982, p.68).

The objective of this study is to understand the symbolic meaning behind the homecoming to observe two canonical cultural traditions in Indonesia and Thailand. Accordingly, this study is expected to bridge mutual understanding between Indonesian and Thai people as I strongly believed that exploring similarities from different civilizations is worth pursuing to deepen our understanding and trust between each other.

### **Literature Review**

Etymologically, Hermeneutic is rooted from classical Greek convention. It is derived from the Greek term *hermeneuein* “to interpret” (Sinha, 2008, p.8). In addition, the word *hermeneutic* is originated from the Greek mythical creature, *Hermes*. As Zeus’s messenger, *Hermes*’s role is to deliver Zeus message into a comprehensible language for other gods and goddesses in Olympus as well as for the mortal on earth (Quito, 1990, p. 8). *Hermeneutic*, as described by Ezzy, 2002, p.24 is the “art and science of interpretation.” It is a series of interpreting process to describe human experience in order to comprehend the “core nature of that experience” (Sinha, 2018, p.11). Thus, “hermeneutic is a process to bring an incomprehensible thing or condition to understanding” (Palmer, 1969, p.3).

Having said that, this study referring to Ricouer’s theory of interpretation to understand the role of symbols as delivered by the people exodus to celebrate the two important festivals in Indonesia and Thailand. In this context, Ricouer’s understanding of symbols is drawn as followed:

The symbol as it stands means more than one thing; there are different levels of meaning contained in it. The most obvious, or literal meaning hides the figurative meaning but at the same time it also discloses it, since the figurative meaning cannot be grasped except through the literal meaning (Blaikie, 1995, p.154).

Hence, in hermeneutic tradition, it is believed that symbols invite an interpretation as “the symbols give rise to the thought” (Ricouer, 1967, p.352). Therefore, Ricouer’s hermeneutic initiates from “symbols and endeavors to promote the meaning, to form it, by a creative interpretation” (Ricouer, 1967, p. 355). It can also be associated with “revealing the unseen” (Preminger 1993, p. 517).

## **Method**

### ***Respondent Recruitment and Data Collection Method***

This study was a qualitative study of a purposive sampling of Indonesian and Thai students between the ages of 17 and 20. The Thai respondents were of Chinese Language and Culture Thailand whereas the Indonesian respondents were the students of English for Academic Purpose's class year 2016, Universitas Sebelas Maret, Solo, Indonesia. The study was conducted in the first week of February 2019. The respondents were exclusively chosen due to their availability for filling up the questionnaire as well as their cultural exposure to the two most celebrated festivals in this study.

Primary data collection for this study was attained through questionnaire filling where the respondents had to answer a list of questions given to them to discover the meaning behind their return to their native towns to observe the tradition in this study. In addition to the main data in this study, secondary data was collected from library study and the internet to collect articles, news, blogs, and related stories about the two festivals in this paper.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This study aimed at unveiling the symbolic meaning that drives the largest homecoming exodus from big cities in Indonesia and Thailand in order to celebrate *Songkran* and *Eid al Fitr* with their family. In order to find the answer of this study, this paper is divided thematically into two sub-categories: the first sub-categorize will highlight a brief introduction of *Songkran* and *Eid al Fitr* to provide a better understanding on what is going in the two famous cultural celebrations. The following sub-categorize will primarily be focusing on the symbols that motivate the Indonesian and Thai people to go home regardless of the external circumstances to spend several days observing the tradition with their beloved people.

### ***Eid Al Fitr***

Eid al-Fitr is one of the foremost religious celebration in Muslim tradition worldwide after they observe thirty days fasting in the holy *Ramadhan* month. *Eid al Fitr* is celebrated by Muslim across the globe at the end of their fasting month. This Muslim special day falls on the first day of *Shawwal* in Lunar *Hijr* year (Eid al-Fitr, n.d.). This day is also widely popular as the day for distributing their blessing in the form of an obligatory alms to the poor and less fortunate people prior to the performing of *Eid* mass, as well as a time to gather with family (Satt, 2017, p.3). In Indonesia, *Eid al Fitr* marks with an exodus of people from big cities in Indonesia to their hometown in smaller cities or rural areas to celebrate one of the most significant religious Muslim holiday with their loved ones. Following all the rituals they have performed, Muslim will visit their elders, neighbors, and their friends to greet them and forgiving each other wrongdoings in the past.

### ***Songkran***

Songkran is the day of celebrating New Year in Thai traditional calendar which falls on 13 April. However, Thai government has extended the holiday from 12- 16 April to enable the citizen travelling home to reunite with their loved ones at their hometown. The word *Songkran* can be traced back from the Sankrit

“samkrati” or “astrological passage”, which means to change or to transform (Songkran Thailand, n.d.).

Songkran is the day when people who work or study in big cities returning home to reunite with their family in rural areas or smaller cities in Thailand. This festival of unity begins by merit making in the early morning, visiting local temples, performing bathing rite, pouring water fragrance on Budha images and the monks, donating food to Buddhist monks, and freeing caged bird back into the sky. Another important rite in *Songkran* day is paying homage to the ancestor. On this reunion day, people will pay reverence to the elders by pouring scented water over the palms of their hands. In return, the elders will pray for the youngsters’ fortune and prosperity. Following this traditional rituals, people of all ages will joyously splash water to each other as Songkran is also widely known as “water festival”. Splashing water to each other symbolizes purification and to wash away ones’ sin and bad luck (Chachaidee, 1994).

### ***Homecoming as the Source of Happiness***

Most of the respondents in this study come from different city where they currently live. They leave their hometown to pursue their higher education in Thailand and Indonesia. This circumstance gives them no choice but to taste the bitterness of separation from the love of their family and friends at home. The sadness they feel when they are away from home and their beloved ones symbolizing the pain of separation in Sufi tradition. Separation, however is something essential, as it is a prerequisite to be closer to the beloved. It is “the element required to propel the traveler forward”, as without it “union cannot be reached” (Sinha, 2015, p. 90). Therefore, it is important to understand that within separation there is an invitation for union (Chittick, 1984, p.232).

Based on the respondents’ answer, it is obvious that there is an assurance in their disconnectedness from their hometown and family: a promise that out of the sadness from being away from their family there is a glimpse of hope every time they remember that there will be a time for reunion. This is best described in Rizal answer who thinks that Eid al-Fitr is very special as he can heal his lovesick to his hometown and family. “I always feel delighted for Eid al-Fitr celebration. This is very special to me because my sadness and loneliness from being away from home and family will be wiped away.” Thai respondents also shared similar feeling about this issue, “I would be very sad if I didn’t go home for Songkran. It is the time in the year that I always waiting for. No...I couldn’t imagine how sad I would be if I couldn’t meet my parents on that day, I have missed them since the last time I met them last year. But I feel happier because Songkran is coming closer and I will be home to be with them again” Bella explained. Opel added, “OMG no....I can’t even think of it. I don’t want to imagine it. My heart would be broken if I don’t meet my mom for Songkran. It’s a family reunion, how can I be happy without being among my parents on that day? It’s been hard to leave here in a city without them”

These young soul longing for their hometown and families symbolizes the longing of a lover toward their Beloved (God) in Sufi tradition. In the beginning, they live together with their Beloved at their origin, then they have to be separated from them in order to pursue their education in different city. Artitaya described her feeling: “I have to leave my parents and my old friends to study in Chiang

Rai. It is true that I meet new people and make new friends, but I cannot help feeling sad for leaving them behind. I always miss them and wish to see them again in the future. That is why Songkran is so special to me even though there are other holidays too. Songkran is a reunion day, it is time for us to go home and reunite with our family.” Ainun wrote that being away from home is truly heartbreaking for her and coming home for Eid al- Fitr is the remedy for her heartbreak: “I’ve lived in Solo for two years, but still I feel lonely because I miss everything in my hometown in Palembang. It is hard to not seeing my parents every day and also my childhood friends. Eid al-Fitr has a very important meaning for me. I can go home and meet my parents, my friends, and my hometown. It is a day when I can replace my sadness for being far from them with joyous reunion.”

With reference to the respondents’ answer above, homecoming can be interpreted as a journey of happiness for them. In homecoming, they find remedy for their loneliness and sadness from being disconnected from their home and family. Their separation from their hometown and their yearning to go home are the symbol of a journey that human has to undertake to get closer or to reunite with their Beloved. The void they feel in their heart as a result of their separation and the excitement they get from the idea of coming home are the symbols of their consciousness of being separated from God and the intense longing to return to it (Hariyatmi, 2015, p.23).

#### ***Homecoming: God invitation for Union***

*Not only do the thirsty seek the water,  
the water as well long for the thirsty  
Rumi, Mathnavi 1: 1741*

Homecoming is the annual event that the respondents in this study are waiting for. They are delighted to return home to their family and spend several days to celebrate the two festivals in this study. Leaving their hometown, those young people cannot be happier when Songkran or Eid al- Fitr day is approaching. At that time, they will return to their origin and spend time with their family and relatives to celebrate Songkran or Eid al-Fitr. “April is coming soon, nothing makes me more excited than counting on the days to meet my mother, it is the time to be reunited with her”, Yu said. Momay, another respondent confessed that she feels delighted as April is coming soon, meaning she will go home and meet up with her family and friends at her hometown.” I feel like I cannot wait until April. I know it’s still February so I kinda exaggerating, but thinking of April and travelling back home make me so excited.”

Returning home means a lot for the respondents in this study as they feel happier and it also makes them more ready to go back to their daily routine far from their loved ones. As explained by Betty,” Homecoming is an annual event that I always wait for. Especially now that I am studying in Java, far from my parents and family who live in Sumatra. I feel so happy even before I go home to meet them and celebrate Eid al- Fitr with them. Coming home after all, makes me feel like I am a new born again, being at home with everyone I love and spending several days in my hometown is something that I believe recharging my body and soul. Yes...I definitely love going home on Eid al-Fitr.” Similar message also echoes in Thai respondents about coming home to observe Songkran with their

parents and family. For them travelling home when all the flight tickets are more expensive than the tickets price on regular days is something that will satisfy their longing to reunite with their family. Junior said that although the flight ticket is very expensive, he would still go home for Songkran: “Of course I will go home. On that day I can meet my parents as well as my relatives from other provinces. They will come to celebrate New Year (Songkran). Nothing will be more delightful than the happiness I feel to be reunited with my parents and family.”

It can be noted from the respondents’ answer above that they yearn to go home and meet their family symbolizes their longing to their original root. As explained in the introduction of this study, human’s love towards their parents, friends, jobs, and any other worldly entities is a ladder leading them into higher form of love. To love is the nature of human and coming closer to their Beloved is the only way to maintain the love they have. Hence, homecoming is the symbol of invitation that God put in human heart to get closer to Him. Nonetheless, the affectionate longing that the respondents in this study encounter, is “not their own work, but was called into existence by God’s activity” (Schimmel, 1982, p. 131). This can be read from Risma answer, she said coming home for Eid al- Fitr is a must for her, despite the obstacles that she has to encounter. She said, “I will always go home in Eid al-Fitr no matter what. I don’t care about how expensive the flight ticket is or how tiring the trip would be. All those are nothing compared to the joy I would feel when I can see my parents, brothers, and sisters. The money I spend and the exhausting trip I took; all is paid off when I see the smile of my parents.” On similar tone, Mata explained that life will provide a way for her to get the remedy of her longing to reunite with her family on Thai’s New Year. She believes that despite of the high flight ticket price, she would manage to get the affordable one: “It might sound ridiculous, but I always believe that life has always been so generous to me. On Songkran celebration, all the price is insane. Yet, I always get affordable price when I booked my flight ticket. Maybe it’s the blessing of Songkran.”

From the above respondents’ answer, it may be seen that all longing in human heart along the effort they take to satisfy those affectionate longing is the “primordial divine grace without which they would not have learned” (Masignon, 1922, p. 610). Hence, “no lover can seek union unless the beloved seeks it (Schimmel, 1982, p. 131). The affectionate longing in the respondents’ heart is put by the divine grace, inviting them to get closer to Him through the love and yearn they feel towards their parents, family, and hometown.

## **Conclusion**

Applying Ricour’s hermeneutic theory, the present study discovered that despite differences between the largest annual traditions in Indonesia and Thailand to observe Eid Al-Fitr and Songkran, both cultural festivals exhibit one remarkable symbolism that breathes similarity in Sufi tradition. The mass exodus of people on the two festivals in this study is triggered by the respondents’ longing to see their hometown and family. The foregoing discussion revealed that the respondents yearn to reunite with their family is the ladder that will bring them to be united with the source of Love, God. As presented in preceding sub category, human’s desire is in fact a desire for God which is veiled by diverse things such as love for parents, hometown, job, or money. Thus, the

homecoming, the cultural phenomenal in Indonesia and Thailand to observe the two canonical religious tradition in the two countries in this study can be seen as metaphor for union or the invitation for union from God in Sufi tradition.

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