

Children Suckling from the Water, Stones and Bamboo: the Women of Ratu Jaya Care for the Ciliwung River

Andi Misbahul Pratiwi

Jurnal Perempuan

pratiwiandi@jurnalperempuan.com

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between women and nature in the village of Ratu Jaya Depok along the Ciliwung river. Ecofeminism framework suggesting oppression of nature as connected to the oppression of women is used. The Ciliwung river was a main water source for Dutch Batavia during the colonial era. It can no longer be used in this capacity due to bamboo felling, illegal logging and illegal housing upstream. Yet, Ratu Jaya's women are still dependent on the Ciliwung river. Domestic work is completed using water from the Ciliwung, and not only that, the Ciliwung is a place to educate their children regarding the stones and bamboo. The water there is relatively clean. The women care for the river and rely on it for their children to survive climate change.

Keywords: Ciliwung water, women, ecofeminism.

Introduction

"The earth and the womb as bodies run on a cosmological timeline. Just as the flow of earth's life-giving waters follows the lunar rhythm, so too follow the tides of a woman's womb. No culture has failed to notice these connections or the related feats of an elemental power that the female can grow both sexes from her very flesh and transform food into milk for them, and that the earth cyclically produces vast bounty and intricate dynamics of the biosphere that allow life. Cultural responses to the physical connections between nature and the female range from respect and honor to fear, resentment, and denigration. Whatever the response, it is elaborately constructed over time and plays a primal, informing role in the evolution of a society's worldview. The central insight of ecofeminism is that a historical, symbolic, and political relationship exists between the denigration of nature and the female in Western cultures."

(Spretnak, 1993)

Ecology was traditionally concerned with the study of plants and animals and as such was only considered a branch of biology. However, humans are living creatures that interact with the environment too, we influence our environment and we in turn are shaped by it. As with other living creatures, we form an ecological system or ecosystem with our environment which consists of biotic and abiotic components. The biotic environment is made up of plants, animals and other people. The abiotic environment includes earth, water, air and light. Apart from our interaction with animals and plants, whether we realise it or not, we also interact with our abiotic environment. In order to protect the ecosystem we must protect the reciprocal relationship between the environment and us. Environmental issues such as natural disasters, climate change and poverty are the result of disharmony in our relationship with the environment. Dewi Candraningrum (2014) writes:

The fundamental understanding on nature is that nature can communicate with human beings, that it can develop a discourse with human beings, provided that human beings can place themselves in an equal relationship with nature. A democratic conversation between human beings and nature will greatly help human beings to develop a new discourse against the episteme that has been cruel to nature. Human beings' authentic experiences with nature can assist human beings in making consideration, policies, and findings that are sensitive to the voices of nature. Human beings therefore get rid of their self-centered state and unite themselves with nature in an organic relationship to avoid hierarchy and exploitation or cruel relationship. (2014:16)

Humans that have long lived close with nature have a holistic view of the world. They feel there is a functional relationship between themselves and the biophysical system. An example of this can be seen in the understanding of the Sundanese from West Java regarding their position in the ecosystem. They believe that humans are a part in, and of a larger entity, where these principles become the life force.

In Javanese mysticism, everything that exists is unique in the world. The tradition of *petungan*, the complex calculations using the elements of days of the week, market days, people's names, the dragons that guard the daily and yearly points of the compass, as well as the gods, demonstrate their unity with the ecosystem. This holistic approach shows why humans should live together with nature.

Women and Water

Water is an integral part of our environment. It is not only the amount which is important, but also the temperature, pH level, and clarity of the water. Ensuring a positive relationship with water is an effort to protect the continuation of life. In ancient times, the people of Mesopotamia successfully developed a sophisticated irrigation system. They redirected the water of the Euphrat and Tigris rivers to irrigate thousands of hectares of farming land. While this technique resulted in progress on one hand, it also caused destruction. In the dry country, the water that was been used for irrigation evaporated quickly raising the salt level in the earth in a process known as salinization. This destroyed the fertility of the land (Soemarwoto, 1978). As technology develops, we are no longer living with nature. It always happens in the same way, what

begins as a mutual symbiotic relationship becomes a parasitic symbiotic relationship where nature is always oppressed. We are the parasite and the water, earth and air are the hosts.

Water is the source of life for all living creatures, including us, and both water and women have been considered a source of life by civilisations across the ages. However, issues of gender and water have never been resolved despite their importance and connectedness. This raises an important ethical issue. Women suffer far greater than men as a result of water scarcity and pollution in developing countries. Women and water are dominated in the same way men dominate women and humans dominate nature. The *World Health Organisation* (WHO) has shown that women's health and welfare influence directly their children and family's health as well as community development. The poor health of one generation of women predicts the problem carried over to next generations.

Vandana Shiva in her book *Water Wars* explains that there needs to be a movement leading the fight against pollution from high-technology industry. Shiva proposes an environmental bill of rights, which includes the right to clean industry; safety from exposure to danger; for prevention; knowledge; participation; protection and enforcement; compensation; and for cleanliness. All of these rights are basic elements of water democracy, where the right to clean water is protected for all citizens. There are nine principles which underlie water democracy 1) *water is nature's gift*, 2) *water is essential to life*, 3) *life is interconnected through water*, 4) *water must be free for sustenance needs*, 5) *water is limited and exhaustible if used nonsustainably*, 6) *water must be conserved*, 7) *water is a commons*, 8) *no one holds a right to destroy* 9) *water cannot be substituted*. These nine principles emphasize that water is a gift.

We receive water freely from nature. We owe it to nature to use this gift in accordance with our sustenance needs, to keep it clean and in adequate quantity. Diversions that create arid or waterlogged regions violate the principles of ecological democracy. (Shiva, 2002)

Water is nature's gift. We receive water freely from nature. We owe it to nature to use this gift responsibly, to keep it clean and accessible to everyone. Exploitation which creates dry or flooded areas violates the principles of democratic ecology.

Life is connected through water. Water connects all creatures and parts of the planet through the water cycle. We all have a responsibility to ensure that our actions do not endanger other people and species. No one has to the right to overuse, misuse, waste, or pollute the water system.

The Source and Tears of the Ciliwung

The Ciliwung river passes through the Regency of Bogor and the cities of Bogor, Depok and Jakarta. The main sources of the Ciliwung river are Mount Gede and Mount Pangrango. There are 62 officially recorded tributaries which flow into the Ciliwung. These seasonal tributaries and annual rivers of the Ciliwung spring in the Mount Gede-Pangrango range. There are hundreds of even smaller streams which look more like small open drains that flow through the tea plantations which stretch across the higher ranges of the mountains. As the streams flow downhill they join, forming larger tributaries eventually ending in the Ciliwung, the Mother River. The largest and longest of the tributaries is the Ciesek river. Further downstream, the number of tributaries flowing into the Ciliwung river reduces.

In ancient times, the Ciliwung was revered and protected as the main source of water. However, it has suffered damage and serious pollution as result of man's actions to its life giver, its mother. Up until the mid-19th century, the Ciliwung was used for drinking water by the Dutch in Betawi. The water was stored in reservoirs originally built near *Benteng Jakarta* in the city's north before being relocated to *Medan Glodok*. Water flowed into the reservoir through wooden pipes from a height of about 10 feet (Abeyasekere, 1989). The water from the Ciliwung was drunk without any purification. However, this caused health problems for the Dutch living in Betawi. The river water brought disease as a result of forest clearing and the use of land for settlement. The water was safe to drink when the forest was still virgin with no inhabitants. The oppression of the Ciliwung resulted in the river's ecological role shifting. The river that used to be a source of water and life had now become a source for tears, bringing floods and other disasters.

The focus of this paper are the women of Ratu Jaya, who have long lived alongside the river. In Ratu Jaya, there are three small neighborhoods where people's lives are closely linked with this

ancient river. Around 200 villagers live in these three neighborhoods and many of them use the Ciliwung in their daily lives. They use the water from the river to do their household chores. The closeness of the women with the Ciliwung is a beautiful face in the stone mirror of the Ciliwung. After living with the river since birth Ibu Uum is grateful. This is what Vandana Shiva calls the "Gift of God".

"Every Sunday there are so many people bathing in the river, it's like a recreation park, the kids are happy. If I'm bored at home, I'll go and sit in some shade by the river and watch the children playing in the water and the bamboo trees. Even though my house is close to the Ciliwung, I've never thrown rubbish in it. Alhamdulillah, the Ciliwung means so much to me, it's a source of life. When it's the dry season, like now, mine and the other villagers' wells are dry. We all come to the Ciliwung to get water."
(Uum, 54 years old)

Superstitions and myths about the river do not interfere with the women's interaction with the Ciliwung. These women continue their activities without any fear. For them, the Ciliwung is like a breastfeeding mother, protecting and giving life with its water, stones and bamboo.

"Well, there are lots of superstitious stories told, but we've never been afraid. Usually it's newcomers who are scared. There are tales of the Ciliwung kuntilanak, female spirits who died giving childbirth and a mythical white crocodile. We like that there are many bamboo thickets here because it's not hot and doesn't stink of motorbike exhaust." (Uum, 54 years old)

The bamboo roots help to stop erosion and prevent the danger of floods. Unsurprisingly, there are several species of bamboo that grow along the river highlighting the importance of the preservation of the area. The roots can also help to manage mercury from hazardous waste. The plants' root fibers filter the waste from the water. Additionally, the roots can be used to contain the water, making it useful in the supply of water.

"I've been here for 30 years. Every day I bathe and do my laundry in the river. My house is quite far from the river, so when it was dry I had to carry water up to the house. Now, me and my husband both have a well and there is a lot of water. The well is near the Ciliwung river, we dug near the banks of the river and the people here in Ratu Jaya call it their spring. People come here every morning to take water from this well to cook." (Zubaidah, 50 years old)

"Ever since I have lived here, I have always bathed in the river with my children. My husband works and bathes using the water from the well. The kids love going to the river." (Yuliani, 30 years old)

The Ciliwung is a silent witness to the ebbs and flows to the lives of those who shelter along its banks. The hustle and bustle of the capital city makes the women appreciate and love the nature here.

"My children really like swimming in the river, I never worry even though there are many large rocks. The children have never been swept away by the river, we are used to interacting with the river. We keep it clean so it is friendly to us. We've also never had floods here, when there is a heavy downpour the water coming from Bogor is muddy because of erosion. Once the rain stops it clears back up again. (Ida, 40 years old)

"I have 4 children and I bathe them all every day in the river. I just use the water from the well for cooking. I like living near the river, because when it's dry the villagers whose houses are far away all come to the river to do their washing and cleaning. In the 10 years that we've lived here, alhamdulillah, we've always been healthy." (Nita, 38 years old)

The women of Ratu Jaya: breastfeeding from the water, stones and bamboo of the Ciliwung

Life is as part of co-evolution with nature, a symbiotic relationship enhanced by the reflections and creativity of the ecological guardians. This is the role of the women of Ratu Jaya. Local efforts to reduce the exploitation of natural resources have begun to take place, from government policies to religious rules. For example, holistic religious teachings about the exploitation of nature by humans have led to the designation of areas as sacred in order to protect them.

There is one part of the river that is still very clean. Every time I go there, I like to put flowers or incense there so lots of people don't go there. I know that the more people who come here, the more rubbish there will be. For example, Mount Semeru, it's so beautiful, and even though there are regulations that you must take your rubbish with you, it's like an ocean of rubbish. (Hidayat, 37 years)

The statements of the women of Ratu Jaya above speak a deep understanding of the river as something that is alive, living and loving. It is influenced by both positive and negative interactions

in its ecosystem. The experience of the destruction of the Ciliwung cannot be erased from the pages of history. The treatment of the Ciliwung has been tragic beyond measure, a cast-aside source of water, a forgotten ecosystem, a womb that has been raped by global capitalism. It is at this moment, that I see the thousand faces of the Ciliwung.

The River: a Place for Water, Children and Women to Rest

The Ciliwung river is now one of the causes of flash flooding in Jakarta, it is often called the sea of rubbish. Ciliwung is insulted because of man's actions. The Ciliwung is a fight between rubbish and water. Those who live in the hills around Bogor have built houses and villas causing erosion to happen rapidly, muddying the water. The villagers that live upstream in Bogor have an endless supply of fresh water, but people living in Jakarta see nothing left in the river. As a metropolitan city, it is easy to drill deep beneath the earth for the water needed to give life to the hotels, apartments, malls and offices. So the question remains, what about those who do not live at the source or the end of the Ciliwung?

Depok is about half way along the Ciliwung. It is far from the source of the river and people there also experience the effects of the pollution from the capital city. The supply of water underground does not always meet their needs. The economy does not turn as fast as in Jakarta. Life there is in a grey area. However, the river that courses through Depok is a blessing for the women of Ratu Jaya. The roots of the Bamboo that still grow along the river provide an ecological function for the environment. Because of the bamboo, the water of the Ciliwung can still be used for household needs.

I've lived on the banks of the Ciliwung since I was born, 54 years. I bathe, go to the toilet, wash my clothes and dishes here. Now, I have one more activity, bathing my grandchildren. The water is still fine for our daily needs. I do my washing in the Ciliwung every two days, in the morning usually. Some of the other women do their washing in the afternoon while they bathe their children. I've never got any skin disease the whole time I've bathed here, the water here is still clean and can be used for wudhu (Uum, 54 years old).

"I'm a local, since I was young I've lived here. In the Ciliwung, we usually bathe, wash our dishes and clothes. Our reproductive health, up until now, is fine, no one has ever gotten cancer. The most

common ailments that we experience are tired and tight muscles and colds because we're too long in the water. When we do our laundry here, of course our clothes get wet too so we bathe here at the same time. The river is very important for us. The children love playing here every afternoon. I don't have a yard or a field where the children can play. So, we don't want the river to be dirty and disappear. The Ciliwung river is our friend" (Mama Dira, 51 years old)

"Me and my children wash in the river wrapped in a cloth usually used for carrying the children, the villagers here are used to bathe like that. The river water here is still clean, there are still many bamboo trees and large rocks. There has never been a flood here like in Jakarta. I like living here, there is the river when you're tired and want to relax. During this dry season, there has been no water aid from the local government. Despite that, we still have the river, so we can face a long dry season". (Nita, 38 years old)

In developing countries, the life of women is closely connected with water. Their household duties are exhausting; almost half of their time is spent doing labour like collecting water. Women are the primary users of water: cooking, cleaning, family hygiene, and sanitation. Despite the understanding of women regarding nature and the availability of water, children's ability to access nature and their experience as managers of the sources of water for their families, this knowledge is often scorned or simply ignored by policy makers and engineers, who are usually men. As Baden writes:

Women are the main users of water: for cooking, washing, family hygiene and sanitation. In these countries, in the same manner as boys enjoy easier access to education than girls, men are traditionally given greater access to technology, training and engineering than women. Despite women's better understanding of natural variations of water availability acquired through countless generations managing domestic water sources, this knowledge is still scorned or simply ignored by policy-makers and engineers who are still usually men (Baden, 1993).

Work that involves water is primarily completed by women. When the sources of water are far away from their homes, and the wells have begun to dry, the women must walk there and carry the buckets of water back to their homes. This sometimes can lead to fatigue and leaves the women susceptible to illness. Bu Ida, one of the villagers of Ratu Jaya who interacts with the river daily, explains:

I've lived here for 13 years after marrying my husband. I used to live in Jakarta. I was surprised when I moved here, having to live with the river. But, as time has gone on, I've become used to doing laundry in the river. My house is quite far from the river, I have to walk around 100 metres. I do the laundry by myself every two days because my husband works and the children have school. I usually take a sack full of clothes when I do the washing, so when I finish it's heavier because the clothes are wet. To get back to the house I have to climb up a steep slope. Everyone who does the washing here is a woman, the men who come to the Ciliwung only do so to fish, and it's only a handful of them. The other women and I do the laundry on the large rocks, around 2 hours every day. We never get any skin diseases, because the water here is always flowing, and there are a lot of rocks. Once I finish the laundry, that evening my feet tingle like they have pins and needles and my arthritis plays up because I've been in the water for a long time (Ida, 40 years old)

Natural femininity that is described here does not refer to female gender characteristics that are constructed as meek and gentle. Knowledge and experience of nature is an experience and difficult endeavor. The reality that the heavy flows of the river cannot be negotiated with. Reproductive health and physical survival is the main daily struggle for the women of Ratu Jaya, as Ida experiences with her leg pains after washing the laundry. Rodda explains:

Women's water-related tasks at home are numerous. When water sources are far from their homes, unclean, or in short supplies, women are the first to suffer from the resulting fatigue and disease that inevitably affect both themselves and their families. When children or other family members are sick on account of water-borne or waterrelated diseases which are preventable and which were widely eradicated from the developed countries during the past century, women must care for those who are ill, thus having less time to care for the other family members, to support their children's schooling, to work in the field and do other activities (Rodda, 1991).

The other women consider the Ciliwung as a long-term investment for the continuation of life. Through the education efforts of the Ciliwung Depok Joint Secretariat, they are beginning to realise that their poor waste management will harm the Ciliwung (again).

The Ciliwung is a place for children and families to relax and play. I normally bring my child here

when I wash. Little kids normally like playing with water. After I finish doing the washing, I wash my child too. I hang out the clothes that have been washed to dry in front of my home. I brush my teeth with water from the river too. I've done this for 15 years. We always remind each other not to throw rubbish into the river, because if we do, the rubbish gets caught in the rocks and ruins the beauty of the river. I want my children to have somewhere to play (Eni, 45 years old)

The children prefer to go the river than to the swimming pool. At the pool it's hot and so crowded. I've lived here for 16 years, and like the other women, I wash and bathe here too. Thank god, I've never gotten any skin diseases. There are a lot of mosquitoes though, but they are from the fields, because the river here is always flowing, so there's no dengue fever mosquito larva. Our household waste is collected every month, we pay 15 000 rupiah. Our environment doesn't smell, it's still clean and fresh.

(Muhlihah, 39 years old)

Rivers are not only the wrestling of water, fish, rocks and bamboo. Rivers have immeasurable experience, the water always flows, even though no one takes notice, she always provides as much milk as possible. Ina Hunga (2014) explains that the destruction of water is destruction of the domestic space of women.

Conclusion: Women's Knowledge and Sustainable Development

In the Beijing Declaration from the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, equitable social development that recognizes empowering the poor, particularly women living in poverty, to utilize

environmental resources sustainably is a necessary foundation for sustainable development (UN, 1995).

Since then, the fundamental role of women as environmental actors has been increasingly recognized. Women often play a leadership role in the promotion of environmental ethics, reducing the use of natural resources to minimise waste and excess consumption. Women, particularly indigenous women, have specialized knowledge about the relationship between ecology and the management of fragile ecosystems. Future developments that do not involve women will not be successful in the long-term. However, there still has much to be achieved to involve them in the decision making, highlighting the importance of providing women with same access to education." (UN, 1995)

Current economic systems, both capitalist and socialist, are based on the delusion that material progress without limits can be achieved by advancing industrialization, without any consideration of the capital cost to the earth, and without any care of pollution, waste disposal or conservation. This current way of thinking must be abandoned in place of a cooperative economy, based on community, a solid state, and a future that acknowledges all living creatures depend on the integrity of the biosphere and local ecosystems. The current system has no fundamental power, and is cultural not biological. There must be a transition from the industrial era to the ecological era in which sexism, patriarchy, racism, ethnocentrism, class hierarchy and castes, are replaced with ecofeminism, a balance between humans and nature and egalitarianism.

References

- Soemarwoto, Otto. *Ekologi Desa: Lingkungan Hidup dan Kualitas Hidup*, Majalah Prisma September 1978. P. 40. Juni 1988. *Batavia: Kisah Jakarta Tempo Doeloe*. Intisari.
- Abeyasekera, Susan. 1989. *Jakarta: A history*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Aureli, Alice & Claudine Brelet. 2004. *Women and Water: An Ethical Issue*. UNESCO.
- Shiva, Vandana. 2002. *Water Wars*. South End Press.
- Spretnak, Charlene. 1993. Critical and constructive contributions of ecofeminism. *The Bucknell Review*, 37(2), 181.
- Spretnak, Charlene. 2003. Agama, Filsafat, dan Lingkungan Hidup. "Sumbangan Kritis dan Konstruktif Eco-feminisme". Yogyakarta: Kanisius, P. 227.
- Candraningrum, Dewi. 2014. *Body Memories. "Under Keningar Trees, the Bulls Drink No More: Myth of Mother Merapi"*. YJP Press.

- Arianti Ina Restiani Hunga, 2014. *Ancaman Kerusakan Ekologis Produksi Batik Rumahan: Narasi Perlindungan Ruang Domestik*. Jurnal Perempuan, Vol.19 No.2, 2014.
- Baden, S. 1993. *Practical Strategies for Involving Women as well as Men in Water and Sanitation Activities*. SIDA, Brighton, IDS, Bridge.
- Rodda, A. 1991. *Women and Environment*. Zed Books Ltd., London and New Jersey.
- Ekspedisi Ciliwung: Laporan Jurnalistik Kompas : Mata Air, Air Mata* (Kompas: 2009).
- <https://staff.blog.ui.ac.id/taqyudin/index.php/2010/12/22/adakah-toponymy-kota-depok-yang-menjadi-cultural-heritage-atau-the-intangible-cultural-heritage/>