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## ***Dimakan Sayang: Turning the Common into the Exclusive, Cassava Bread (*Embal*) in The Kei Islands, Southeast Maluku, Indonesia***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article traces changes in everyday narratives considering cassava bread (*embal*) in the Kei Islands. Various methods of data collection (participant observation, focused group discussion, and survey) were used, and applied purposively to produce critical narratives on the transformation of local food patterns. These data were collected over a short fieldwork period in 2016 from the villages of Wain, Rumaat, and Langgur in the Kei Islands, Southeast Maluku. As this traditional staple food is being replaced by rice, Kei people are creatively adjusting both their attitudes and appetites towards *embal*. Both conceptual (noetic) shifts and sensory (taste) shifts are apparent. The typical taste or flavor of *embal* is increasingly celebrated and regarded as a special blessing. Yet, at the same time, many young Kei are now preferring to eat imported rice more than *embal*. They are losing their appetite for consuming *embal* as a daily common food, even as they increasingly adore and celebrate it as a luxurious meal. This suggests that the villagers have become bigger consumers of imported food (rice and noodles) than their city-based counterparts. As such, *embal* consumers (the local food's contributors to sovereignty) in the market will continuously be under pressure, diminishing in numbers, in accordance with the rise of its exclusive image. Such is the irony for cassava as food sovereignty in the Kei Islands.

**Keywords:** *appetite; embal; food sovereignty; meal; narratives*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Diverging a little from Claude Levi-Strauss' way of treating food as "good to think," as "of the order of language" or as a semiotic expression of a certain unconscious structural model (Culler, 2013: 9), this article is more inspired by Sidney W Mintz's (1996, p.79) discursive exercise about how the sweet taste of sugar had a distinctive history that changed many things, including notions and senses of time, gender, class, and other social relationships. Thus, this article argues that the consistent appreciation of the taste of *embal* (cassava bread)<sup>1</sup> should have always been able to support the struggle of Indonesia for food sovereignty. The introduction of cassava in Africa by the Portuguese during the 16th century provided an effective reserve

against hunger (Tannahill 1981, p.245). However, while Mintz (1985) argued the meaning of the sweetness of sugar as a reflection of highly appreciated taste, this article deals more with the marginalized taste of tubers/cassava as staple food.

Prior to the invention of its industrial refinery technology however, the pure sweetness of sugar was a luxury enjoyed by the elites in Europe. By the time workers in England appropriated it and were happy drinking sweet tea and feeling like elites, they had surrendered themselves to become cheap laborers for the industry. Eventually the sweetness of sugar transformed the economic and social bases of the entire society (Mintz 1985, p.214). Contrary to the historical contribution of the sweetness of sugar

for a great leap of social economic transformation in England, the contribution of the taste of cassava for Indonesia's food security and sovereignty is yet to be promoted. The taste of cassava is frequently associated with the miserable life of the poor, who live in the most arid and remote places of Indonesia. It is quite common that people chat about how its taste is not as good as the taste of rice, and of course even less than the taste of food made of imported flour such as bread and noodles. Up until today, cassava has not received a proper appreciation in Indonesia's food strategy, even though its effectiveness to produce food per square meter of land might reach up to ten times higher than rice and any other grains. It is of course an irony for Indonesia, as the third biggest cassava producer in the world, that most of its cassava is for industry rather than for food security.

The result of ST 2013 Agricultural Census<sup>2</sup>, a thematic sub-sector analysis of the security, independence and sovereignty of food in Indonesia, shows that food sovereignty in Indonesia has not been reached because food security has not been realized. Only 23.39% of the population in Indonesia is food secure and the other 76.61% is insecure (susceptible 40.31%, vulnerable 24.21% and shortage 12.08%). The levels of food security vary in Indonesia. The lowest food security region is Maluku and Papua (16.73%) with the prevalence of food vulnerability of 40.73%. Food security in Sumatra is also poor because the prevalence of food shortage there is the highest in Indonesia (22.94%). Meanwhile the highest food security level in Indonesia is in Sulawesi (29.50%), the famous main rice barn of Eastern Indonesia. Java is not the most food secured place, even though it has the lowest food shortage number (11.71%). Evidently, in facing this lack of food security situation, efforts have not led towards the growth of food production capacity in the country, even though the potentials exist (BPS 2015: 106-107).<sup>3</sup>

The BPS (Central Bureau of Statistics) study result is garnered from an analysis based mainly on grain food products such as rice, corn and soy. Therefore, areas that rely on non-grain-based food sources, especially sago and cassava, are not counted. Maluku and Papua have been known for the longest time as areas that rely on sago, sweet potatoes, and cassava as food. It almost makes sense, if according to the product count of "Pajale" (*padi* or rice, *jagung* or corn and *kedele* or soy) both areas are deemed to be the least secured. It is of course ironical not just for those two areas but also for the whole country.<sup>4</sup> To add to the understanding of the "real" status of food security and sovereignty pattern in the regions of non-Pajale reliance, it is imperative to explore how

people in such a region as the Kei Islands in Southeast Maluku maintain their lives beyond the formal definition of national food security. People in these islands traditionally rely mainly on *embal* or cassava bread for their staple food. Of course, they grow and produce small amounts of rice and grains from their arid land. Based on the national (Pajale) pattern of food security, they are certainly insecure. Therefore, from time to time they have become a continuous, but not necessarily correct, target of the imposition of the national rice-based pattern of food security policy. However, people are creatively struggling on the "bottom" of this structural imposition to adjust their minds and their appetites on *embal*.<sup>5</sup>

This discourse will be presented in an ethnographically contextual way, so that the events will no longer be unique and strange but will expand and reflect on our own (noetic<sup>6</sup>) "cosmopolitan" self. Therefore, still in the spirit of interpretative anthropology *a la* Clifford Geertz (1972), it lays upon the interpretation of relationship between patterns for and patterns of daily social actions. The description procedure starts from the shallow description from when an occurring event is observed. Then with a fuller argument the description will be connected with other facts, then put in context in one coherent description. Although, without an overt pretension on the deconstructive movement *a la* post-structuralism and so there will be a real expansion from the spirit of food sovereignty, this article suggests that the events described should be reflected critically until we come to a point of self-awareness (*genah diri*). Hopefully, the unique events in this article may spark a discourse, "a celebration of our collective humanity" (Campesina 2018: 27), to improve our way of feeding and nourishing ourselves (Campesina *idem.*: 3; Laksono 2021).

## TRACING THE TASTE AND THE NOETICS OF EMBAL

A student of UGM (Gadjah Mada University), of Kei-Javanese background, during a dinner party with almost 30 other students after a field-work in Selaru, South West Maluku, suddenly exclaimed excitedly: "Hey, there are *embal* here!" when he saw the flower-shaped *embal* cassava bread served on the table. Before this remark, not one student gave the *embal* any attention, nor touched it, even though they had just returned from two months' stay in a place where *embal* was commonly traded. The student of Kei-background happily ate it while talking about the piece of *embal* in his hand to his friends.<sup>7</sup> That event happened at my house in Yogya in 2016. Of course, as the host I was flattered to be able to make my guest

happy. It was weird though, that after the two months of their stay living with the villagers in South West Maluku, the students were acting as if they had never seen or tasted *embal*. I found out that they ate rice daily over there. However, I was happy to be able to witness a young man loving *embal*, a type of food typical of Kei, made of processed poisonous cassava (*mandioca Sao Pedro Petro*).

It turned out that he had never set his foot in his father's motherland, while I had lived there and often visited it. How could he like *embal*, since he had lived in Yogyakarta, thousands of kilometers away from the Kei Islands, since the day he was born, a place where *embal* is unknown? He said that his father often told him stories about his love for it and how his father missed the food he ate every day when he was a little boy living in Kei. More than that, he said that he often enjoys eating *embal* which once in a while is sent to heal his father's longing for the land of his birth. The love for *embal* has apparently turned into a symbol of identity for the people in Kei, connecting them with their relatives living a long way away. Kei people often tell stories about being a fan of *embal* with pride, even though there are people among them who have lost that pride. He himself is one of those who are proud of *embal*.<sup>8</sup> Next, this article will trace the relationship between the treasured food, and other typical foods, with their identity.

Recent discourse in the anthropology of food reveals the intersection of food and the senses (gustemology) as central to the understanding of wider social issues in everyday life (Sutton 2010). Of course, for Mintz (1985), the (pure) sweetness of sugar was a social boundary marker. In the old days, it was too expensive and almost impossible for a commoner to taste even a drop of sugar. However, exactly by releasing its exclusive taste, the sweetness of sugar was able to precipitate the birth of (sugar-hungry) cheap labor needed by the industry. In other words, "all culture uses food to mark or build relative prestige and social status" (Pottier 1996). In India for example, food divides vegetarians of the higher castes and non-vegetarians of the lower castes. Hence food is a ground for the current of daily identity discourse towards the realm of birth. Wherever identity is being discussed, with any arrangement of attributes and symbolism, it ends up returning to food that one is familiar with early in life, the product of the land of our birth. It is common for a person to confess that he feels comforted after enjoying the food that his parents put in his mouth when he was a baby. Through the daily eating ritual of a baby a primordial identity is formed and seeped through the body as a preferred taste as the meaning

of self grows. A stomach feels a little empty before the daily food is eaten. Once embedded deep inside someone, an identity that is glued to the primary food is tough to change. The father of that student above has to be one of those who had such problems.

The experience of C. Nadia Serematakis (1996: 1-2) of losing her remarkable sense of the peach, "the breast of Aphrodite," might illustrate such problems. The peach's typical taste, a bit sweet and a bit sour, and its typical fragrance turns out to be incomparable to any peach available in the market, and it becomes a memory still waiting to be named. Serematakis says that no single peach in the market today tastes as good as those she had in the past (1996:1). It is just like when the part becomes the representation of the whole, and its narrative appearance takes place as the original disappears (idem.:2). It is quite similar to the visual sense of looking at a pricking detail of a photograph (*punctum*), which takes the general view (*studium*) of its photograph (Barthes 1980). The flavor palette of *embal* on the tongue of that student's father is sensually carried as a typical taste of his past and intellectually rhymed (narrated) as a beautiful noetic (intellectual) activity for his son, right in Yogyakarta where *embal* is not available.

To start tracing the footprint of that relationship of father's and son's beautiful noetics and their past taste of *embal*, my research assistants and I conducted a focused group discussion with about 50 female producers plus one or two men who are resellers and brokers (*papalele*) of *embal*, fish and vegetables in Langgur<sup>9</sup> market on May 7th 2016. As Kei people themselves, they presumably know quite comprehensively about the food system of *embal* from its production, distribution and consumption. The themes that we covered are: 1. In what configurations and combinations are *embal* consumed in their household? 2. Where do they get their goods? 3. Were there any process altering their products before they get to their customers? 4. What is the top selling product? If it was *embal*, what form of *embal* was selling the most? *Embal gepe*, *levlevan*, *lun*, *bunga*, *kacang*, *tuntuil* or *bukbuhuk*?<sup>10</sup> 5. Next, for what occasions did the customer usually buy the products from them? 6. What type of labor sacrifices and money they spent to alter their product value? How are they enjoying the processes they conduct in the market?

It is not easy to find a fixed pattern of how their customers consume *embal*. They know and from personal experience that *embal* is good with fish, *aroan sir-sir* dish, and *colo-colo* sauce or *tutui kamatil* sauce.<sup>11</sup> The *embal* vendor at the market buy their *embal* raw, then process it from behind their table into *embal kembang* and *lempeng*. Some of them, especially those who are from Kei Besar,



**Figure 1.** *Embal* sellers in the old Langgur market. Source: PM Laksono's 2016 collection

sleep at the market, selling 24 hours a day. For their meals, if they don't buy *nasi bungkus* (wrapped rice), they break off little bits of the *embal* that they are selling and fry it (*bukbuhuk*), then they buy a little bit of fish and either fry it or cook it in *kuah kuning* (yellow stew) to become the main dish. According to them, *embal bunga* is the top selling *embal* product and usually the customers are those who plan to ship it to their relatives who live away from home or want to bring it on a long sailing trip. For domestic consumption, Kei people usually cook *embal* themselves. The *embal* sellers at the market provide a means of strengthening the connection between Kei away from home with their relatives back in the homeland.

Of course, the happiest moment for the agricultural product sellers in Langgur market is the moment when their product sells. If they sell all of the *embal*, they can go home and return to the market the next day to sell more *embal*. They will be concerned when their goods are not selling or selling slowly. They say that there is always happiness and hardship every day. Hardship is when they have to plant *embal*, pull out the weeds from the growing crop, process *gepe*, then package it and carry it to the market themselves.

In the market *embal* producers hope to sell to the customers directly, while the *papalele* try to make a profit for themselves as intermediaries. The *papalele* would offer IDR 50,000 for a pile of six *gepe*, hoping to resell it for IDR 50,000 for a pile of five in the same market. The vegetable vendors employ similar tactics, maintaining the same price for a pile or a bundle but taking a little out of each pile. The vegetable vendors face an extra difficulty, however, because their produce deteriorate if they are not sold on the same day. They wish they have a cooling

facility, like the cold storage available for fish.

Swinging between happiness and hardship in life is understandable. But depending on produce that is weather-sensitive means the situation may sometimes worsen. In Java, such vendors often leave defeated and admit that their life is just "*adang-adang*," dependent on good fortune coming their way. In the Langgur market, some *embal* sellers fill the gap between happiness and hardship with "worship," praying and going to church before they open their stall. They pray for their produce and for their customers. I once found one of the *mama-mama* (women) selling *embal* in Langgur market putting a statue of Jesus on the cross next to the flower-shaped *embal*. Why, I asked. She said:

"May those men (*bapak-bapak*) who buy my *embal* be blessed. Certainly, because God has blessed our *embal*. If they buy our *embal* and eat it, they will get the blessing.... They gave us wealth, so let God bless them too." ("*Biar bapak-bapak dorang yang beli embal saya dapat terima berkat Tuhan. Iya to, Tuhan di situ sudah kasih berkat embal katorang, nanti dong beli far makan ini embal jadi berkat sudah. ...dorang su kasi katorang rejeki, jadi biar dorang dapat berkat Tuhan to.*")

That answer not only depicts the spirituality of an *embal* seller in Langgur market, who sees her professional work as a religious service, but it also illustrates the creativity of that woman in appropriating the universal Catholic theology to make her product (*embal bunga*) a sacred thing, a blessing for her customers. With such



**Figure 2.** A cross amidst *embal bunga*. Source: PM Laksono's 2016 collection

rhetoric she changes *embal* into a symbol of sharing a blessing in the (Christian) universal discourse. Here, this research shows how Kei custom (*adat*) can creatively and uniquely survive in the universality and contribute to “marketing” in modern Indonesia.<sup>12</sup>

All sellers in the market like to grow their business, the Kei no less than other ethnic groups, but one Kei woman explained how local custom made it more difficult for her. Often, because of her obligations to her ancestors, she had to return home to make *yelim* (gifts) – a reciprocal gift exchange system in Kei Islands – whenever there was a funeral, a wedding, or a construction of a house. A lot of money was spent on these occasions, she said. Nevertheless, whenever she had money, she felt happy.

Today, the faith of those sellers and their *embal* is uncertain due to the persistent application of the national rice-based program of food security in the islands. Regularly, the national government distributes rice in a strategic number to fill up the market needs and to help the poor. Hence, the distribution of “*beras murah*” (cheap rice) as part of rice for the poor program has become a serious contender to the local food diversity, especially *embal*. In the past rice was mainly distributed as part of the salary of civil servants in Indonesia. Nowadays the children in Kei, as told by the women in the market, prefer to eat rice than to eat *embal*, even though up to the early 1980’s Kei people were very proud of *embal* and other types of cassava as their source of carbohydrate. Many Ohoi<sup>13</sup> Debut young men may thank the *embal* that they produced and consumed, for it allowed them to become college graduates. According to Isak Ikanubun who was working at South East Maluku BAPPEDA office, people in Ohoi Debut proudly claim that their village name, Debut, is an acronym of “*Dengan Embal Usaha Tercapai*” (With *Embal* we reach our goals).

There is a paradox in the shift of the preference of young Kei, as they start to like imported rice more than *embal* even while they remain proud and love the *embal* they produce themselves. This has inspired the launch of new restaurants in Watdek, Disuk, Pasir Panjang, Evu and other tourist destinations all around Kei Island that serve *embal bukbuhuk*, grilled fish and *colo-colo* sauce as the main menu. The women from Ohoi Evu other than being the masters of serving *ubi*, *talas* and banana covered by fried *embal* and sauced with *tuntuil kamatil*, had also made and marketed cheese *embal* and chocolate *embal*. National and international connections, mainly through tourism campaigns, give expression to the creative talent of developing an image of local food for a broader audience.<sup>14</sup>

## DIMAKAN SAYANG: WHEN EMBAL BECOMES TOO VALUABLE TO EAT

To delve into this paradox, this study mapped out the pattern of *embal* production and consumption by interviewing 150 respondents, consisting of heads of households from three *ohoi* (customary village) that were connected in the production, distribution and consumption of *embal*. The respondents were chosen by random sampling method.<sup>15</sup> The three *ohoi* were Wain, Rumaat, and Langgur. They are all located on the east side of the Kei Kecil islands. Wain was an important *embal gepe* producer. The surrounding villages, including Rumaat, bought *embal gepe* to be processed and turned into circle-wheel *embal*, etc. Almost every day there were *embal* being sold at the *ronda* (night watch) post located on the right side of the road towards Wain from Langgur. According to one of the members of an *embal* farming group called *Embal Merdeka*, there were about a dozen groups there. Other than an *embal* producing center, Wain was also well-known as the burial ground of Dit Sakmas, a woman who was the figurehead of the promotion of Kei tradition. Ohoi Rumaat is now the capital of East Kei district. In the history of Kei, Rumaat also held a prominent position; it was the birthplace of Larvul Ngabal (the Kei customary) laws. Since the late 19th Century, Langgur became an important center of the Catholic Mission in Maluku and the southern part of Papua. The Mission built a leprosy hospital and a general hospital, schools and a seminary. Since the beginning of Indonesia’s independence, Langgur, along with Tual, grew into the main centers of the local government. Along with Ohoi Kolser, Langgur provided the land for an airstrip of the Indonesian Air Force. Langgur has become the center of economic growth and modern lifestyle in South



Figure 3. *Embal* plants (*manioc*). Source: PM Laksono’s 2016 collection

East Maluku. Seen simply, Wain was seen to represent rural lifestyle, Rumaat as suburban and Langgur as the city lifestyle.

From the average household income of the respondents, hierarchy can be seen from the three “village-city.” Household incomes get higher as people get closer to the city, their sources of income also come from employment as civil servants and in private businesses. Women in the city don’t have any income from the farming sector. Women’s income in fishery is non-existent. It means that people’s incomes have a tendency to get smaller as they get closer to the village and tend to rely on farming and fishery (Table 1), while women don’t make anything from fishery.

From the household expenditure of the respondents (table 2), there is an inconsistent tendency with income. The differences between those three places still exist. However, the households in Wain (village) apparently spent more than Rumaat respondents, especially on education. People in the villages pay more for education than those who live in the regency city. Because the education facility in the village is only up to middle school, people in the village had to pay more to put their children in school in the regency city. The education facility in this regency is available up to high school; therefore, Rumaat school-children do not have to pay for transport to school until they graduate from high school. So, transportation costs for Rumaat respondents are the lowest. Respondents from the regency capital (Langgur) spend even less on education cost compared to respondents in the regency

towns and villages. For the Kei islanders, the education cost is inversely proportionate to their income. As their income gets lower the closer, they live to the villages, their educational costs get higher. Meanwhile, the expense for *sirih* (betel nut) and cigarettes is harder to clarify because people in Rumaat who live in between village-city have the highest money spent on these items. Does the midpoint position increase their addictive needs? It needs to be studied further.

Specifically related to eating habits, almost all respondents assert that the quality of the food they consume today is the same or even better than the food they had in the past. Only six out of 150 respondents assert that the quality of their food today is less than that in the past. This fact clearly indicates the food adequacy of the respondents. Almost all respondents eat 2-3 portions of rice a day, although the number of people in Wain village who eat rice only once a day are the highest compared to those respondents from the other two places. This is consistent with people who the day before the interview consumed cassava/*embal* once. Wain respondents eat *embal* the most. There are more people who did not consume cassava “yesterday” (before the interview) and “today” (the day of the interview) the closer the interviewees are from the city (Table 3).

Langgur has the most people who did not eat cassava “today” while the least people who did not consume cassava live in Wain. From the rice eating pattern, there seemed to be a little bit of difference between respondents from Wain, Rumaat or Langgur. The

**Table 1.** Previous month’s average husband & wife income

Village/ Ohoi	Source of income (round up x1000 rupiah)					
	Salary of Civil servant/Private	Agriculture	Fishery	Trading	Others	Total
Wain (N=50)	164	454	6	30	184	837
Rumaat (N=51)	469	186	76	27	425	1.184
Langgur (N=50)	1.397	77	8	100	413	1.995

Source: Primary Data, (Laksono et.al. 2016)

**Table 2.** Previous month’s average household expenditure

Village/ Ohoi	Purpose (round up x1000 rupiah)					
	Food	Betel nuts/ Cigarette	Education	Transportation	Others	Total
Wain (N=50)	428	154	336	98	60	1.076
Rumaat (N=51)	485	174	183	71	74	967
Langgur (N=50)	623	130	126	134	205	1.218

Source: Primary Data (Laksono et.al. 2016)

**Table 3.** Frequency of eating cassava “today” and “yesterday”

Village	Food type: Cassava							
	Yesterday (Respondents)				Today (Respondents)			
	0	x1	x2	x3	0	x1	x2	x3
Wain	10	14	13	13	12	14	8	16
Rumaat	21	9	17	4	23	6	18	4
Langgur	22	13	9	6	24	14	5	7

Source: Primary Data (Laksono et.al. 2016)

**Table 4.** Frequency of eating rice “today” and “yesterday”

Village	Food type: Rice									
	Yesterday (Respondents)					Today (Respondents)				
	0	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	3	4
Wain	2	12	13	20	3	12	8	11	17	2
Rumaat	9	4	22	13	3	9	41	1	0	0
Langgur	0	1	22	27	0	0	2	48	0	0

Source: Primary Data (Laksono et.al. 2016)

**Table 5.** Frequency of eating noodles “today” and “yesterday”

Village	Food recurrence: Noodle					
	Yesterday (Respondents)			Today (Respondents)		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Wain	19	4		11	3	
Rumaat	5	2	1	3	1	1
Langgur	11	4		5	2	

Source: Primary Data (Laksono et.al. 2016)

respondents in Wain only ate rice once the day before the interview, while in Rumaat and Langgur the respondents would eat rice two or three times that day (table 4).

It makes so much sense that there are a lot of respondents who still eat *embal* in Wain, the food they produce themselves from their own harvest. Even though there is no rice paddy in Kei islands, Kei farmers planted dry land (*huma*) rice on their field once a year. Therefore, it makes sense if they consume only a limited amount of rice. Life in the village really has to rely on their own farming efforts, as income from outside of the farming sector is rare. Moreover, Ohoi Wain is well known as one of the *embal*-producing village in the islands, whereas the other two villagers recently use store-bought *embal*. With the help and mentoring from the related department, the farmers in Wain were able to develop an organized and a productive farming business. Each farmers group

own a grating machine and *embal* press. Husband and wife are actively involved in production. Because farming in Kei is a cyclic land farming on land that is managed collectively by *matarumah* (House), farming also means living together in the local community. Farming is not detached from a rigid traditional law (Rahail, 1995: 34-38). Instead of being a remnant of the past, if it is not blocked by the urban bias of our taste, this kind of peasant farming is always a substantial contributor for food sovereignty, to the total agricultural growth (Ploeg 2014: 1 and 1009-1010). Even during many economic and financial crisis, peasants at the forefront are resisting against extinction due to unfair treatment conditioned by selfish world that we live today and artfully producing reliable food for the volatile market (Ploeg 2014: 2013; Ploeg 2020: 18, and Rahman 2020). No food sovereignty without peasanties (Ploeg 2014: 1026).

The irony is that Wain has the most peasant respondents that consume noodles on the day of the interview and the day before (table 5). The struggle of tradition actualization by the Wain farmers faces extreme options: planting for their own needs or planting for the produce to be sold and bartered with other products and keep some money from the sale of *embal*? We heard in the Langgur market that *embal* is more expensive than noodle or rice, causing *embal* to lose the power to compete. A piece of *embal gepe* is priced no less than IDR. 60,000 to 80,000, which will feed a family of five for only two or three days. If the money were spent on rice, the buyer will get six kilograms of rice, enough to feed the family for about four days. Thus, the price of *embal* in the market is more expensive than rice and *embal* had become a luxury food. Even *embal* farmers in Wain look as if they will only consume their own *embal* with a heavy heart. They think it is better to use the money to buy noodle or rice. Thus, the number of *embal* customers in the market has gone down, hand in hand with the increase of its exclusivity.

## CONCLUSION

After discovering Kei creative moments in managing noetics and taste, the use and cultivation of *embal* as a food for their identity, it should be noted that the Kei people really love their *embal*. However, it is not easy to find a rigid pattern configuration in the ways *embal* is domestically processed, distributed, and consumed. The Kei people show high level of creativity in the noetics of *embal*. *Embal* traders in the market serve not just as a link in the chain connecting domestic and national distribution, but as a creative conduit through which their food is turned into a prayer for God's blessings for their customers. There, they succeed in transforming food into something sacred, turning it into a universal blessing of God (in modern Indonesia) but still bounded, rooted in their traditional custom of exchanging gifts (*yelim*) that please the heart (especially when they obtain a lot of money).

However, their love for *embal* is disturbed by the distribution of "cheap rice," especially that through the Indonesian government's program of providing rice for the poor, which has resulted in it becoming a serious competitor against local food, especially *embal*. Nevertheless, there are still people who are proud producers of *embal*, local non-Pajale (*padi, jagung, kedele*), such as the people in Debut who transformed the name of their beloved village to an acronym that stands for "*Dengan Embal Usaha Tercapai*" (With *Embal* we reach our goals), or the people in Wain who continue to

produce *embal*. Meanwhile, this big change in the food sector shows a big paradox, wherein young Kei people are shifting to a preference for (imported) rice over *embal* while at the same time being very proud and loving *embal* as their own product.

In this situation, it is clear that rather than being pushed to be a source of food sovereignty, *embal* is transformed into an exclusive snack in restaurants and touristic places. This creativity positively succeeds in increasing the appreciation and price of *embal* in the market. Here, the desire for food sovereignty and avoidance of dependency on imported food clashes with the preference for the cheaper outcome. This fact is amplified by other data, among them being the cost of education, which is greater for villagers (who are food producers) than city residents (food consumers). The impact is clear: the villagers have become bigger consumers of imported food (noodles) than city dwellers. Therefore, *embal* consumers (the local food's contributors to sovereignty) in the market will continuously be under pressure, diminishing in numbers, in hand with the rise of its exclusive image. It is hard to escape from the trap of imported food, particularly when the local food becomes superbly appreciated: as daily food, it is "too valuable to eat" (*dimakan sayang*), while it is adored as a luxurious meal. They would rather sell it than eat it.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1) *Embal* is the local term for cassava bread made



out of the bitter and poisonous variety of cassava. The production of embal in the Kei islands is very similar to that found by the Spaniards in the Lesser Antilles and Cuba in the Caribbean Sea at the end of the 19th century (Tannahill 1973: 245). The cassava is peeled, grated and squeezed under heavy pressure to separate the toxic cyanide from the tapioca starch.

- 2) ST 2013 (Sensus Pertanian/Agricultural Census)
- 3) Related to his campaign for Berdikari (short for '*Berdiri di atas kaki sendiri*', *Standing on our own feet*) the first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, more than half a century ago promoted food sovereignty of the country by producing *Tekad*, an analog rice made of cassava, peanut and soybean. However, up until today the national government has still found itself difficult to wage a sound policy of diversifying national food while reducing the dependence on (imported) rice and working on the environmentally appropriate domestic food (Hasbi 2014).
- 4) The Asia Pacific Studies Center of Gadjah Mada University found that the Indonesian government treated cassava more as a trade commodity rather than as food. The trade surplus of 23 commodities out of cassava in 2013 was US\$486 million, i.e., US\$1.2 billion of export minus US\$770 million of import. There were two losing commodities, as their import values exceeded their export. They were coming from cassava for people's food in the form of starch/flour (SITC 59214) and from cereals containing flakes and a mixture of tubers (SITC 04811) (PSAP 2016). SITC is an acronym for the Standard International Trade Classification of goods developed by the United Nations.
- 5) On how the custom and the people in the Kei Islands are creatively struggling on the 'bottom' of the formal structure for a self-initiated development, see P.M. Laksono (2016).
- 6) 'noetic' is a word from the Greek *noētikos*, from *noētos* 'intellectual', from *noein* 'perceive' (Version 2.2.1 (143.1) © 2005-2011 Apple Inc. Dictionary).
- 7) This event goes to what Robin Fox says: "What we eat becomes a most powerful symbol of who we are" (2015: 2), and also to Michael Symons's proposition: "We follow our individual stomach, and yet, crucially we are what we eat together" (2020: xii).
- 8) It is here, that food is a symbol for identity (Fox idem.), which needs other's recognition. The desire for food is the desire for its conviviality, i.e. the other side of Market economy (Boisvert 2021) where greed is predominant (Symons 2020: x).
- 9) Langgur is the capital of the regency of Southeast Maluku. It is located in Kei Kecil Island and its market is located at the southern tip of the town.
- 10) *Gepe* is a white-yellow rounded raw embal. Its size is around 25 cm in diameter, 15 cm in height and its weight is between five to eight kilograms. *Levlevan* is sautéed embal, almost like fried rice. *Embal bunga* is a finely pounded raw embal baked in a waffle maker. If it is flat and mixed with peanut, people call it *embal kacang*. If it is baked in a bamboo stem, people call it *embal tuntuil*. *Embal bukbulan* is made the way we make pancakes.
- 11) *Colo-colo* sambal is hot sauce made of sliced chili, tomatoes, onions, some salt and sweet soybean sauce. *Tuntuil kamatil* sambal is made of coarse red chili, tomatoes, salt, and a little sugar and sometimes a dash of hot oil to taste.
- 12) A related account is given by Michael T. Taussig (1980: 126-139) about mine and plantation workers in Latin America, who quietly baptize a piece of money when they become a godfather of a baby. That money is named with the same Christian name of the baby and he becomes the godfather of that money. One day that child would somehow die in limbo. The godfather then spends that money at the shops while whispering to himself that the money would return to him bringing its friends. In the case of Latin America, the baptism of money is not intended for sharing the blessing, but just for selfish reasons, wickedly using the soul of the child that he is supposed to protect.
- 13) *Ohoi* is the traditional term for the smallest unit of settlement prior to the introduction of today's village structure. A more extensive account of the transformation of *ohoi* is available in my other article (Laksono 2016).
- 14) Some women turn beer bottles and water bottles, drink cans waste and bottles to pack crunchy fried peanuts in them. Also, the Smelter in *Ohoitahit* was able to turn aluminum waste from soda cans and scrap parts to make embal-waffle iron.
- 15) Thanks to the South East Maluku BAPPEDA which allowed us to visit and interview the respondents.

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