

# We Followed Our Curiosity to the Forest

## On Laku and Getting Lost

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### Abstract

Departing from the experience of being lost in the forest, this essay explores the idea of “laku” and local embodied knowledge. Laku refers to learnings gained through bodily experiences under specific circumstances, as well as those passed down orally from one generation to another in the form of rituals, ceremonies and embodied knowledge. Laku is inclusive and contains an element of internalising values by getting involved. It requires a progressive and stimulating process to reflect and learn about the harmony of humans’ minds and the universe.

When knowledge is transmitted orally or through embodied experience, what are the proper academic protocols and citation processes? Were stories and myths properly cited or were they considered and dismissed as backwards/non-modern knowledge? Can an embodied local knowledge traverse beyond the realm of a footnote into a properly credited idea, incorporated and equally acknowledged in academic essays? Is it even necessary, or can we demand the right to opacity for local embodied knowledge to traverse beyond academic protocols?

### Field Note: First Walk (5 September 2020)

*We followed our curiosity to the forest.*

*The village of Kaliurang was unusually empty that day.<sup>[1]</sup> The two of us walked past the residential areas for an hour before taking a turn into the community forest (Hutan Rakyat).<sup>[2]</sup> After a while, we turned right, further away from the agroforestry area where we found a recreational spot devastated by one of many Mount Merapi eruptions.<sup>[3]</sup>*

*We went deeper and deeper into the forest. Our aim was to find the nearest water resource which we believed to be located across the hill. We could already hear the water, but we could not see it. It did not bother us. We took the less-travelled footpath down the hill into a ravine. We were fascinated as we immersed ourselves into the green and shadowed depth of it. The air was crisp and cool, and it smelled green. Like a combination of fern, moss, wet ground and foliage; we could almost taste it. The ravine was dense and lush with bamboo, Kaliandra and wild shrubs. We took a moment to take it all in:*

*the complex freshness in the air, the sound of our steps on dried bamboo leaves, the birds, the rustling wind touching our skin.*

*As we climbed along the hill, the landscape changed from the narrow and cold ravine to a dense tropical montane ecosystem overgrown with various irregular, dark and unkempt plants. There was no visible footpath and some areas were covered in cobwebs. We kept going up heading North. What we first noticed was how messy and unusual the shape of the trees around that area was. Soon we realised the forest we were walking in was the same one that was struck by the pyroclastic flow ten years ago. The trunk was burnt and the tree fell but the roots are resilient and growing some horizontally before going up to find more sun.*

*We arrived at an open field that leads to a pasture. There, we found a big tree on the ground. The old white bark was like that of an elephant's wrinkled skin. We were fascinated. To me, the dead tree reminds me of a much smaller version of Henrique Oliveira's tree installation. I traced the surface with my hand, admiring the colour, feeling the hard flaky texture as I touched it or rather, it touched me.<sup>[4]</sup> The air was clean and crisp. Around us was the sound of birds whirring and chattering, an animate natural world. I felt like I was in my element immersed, part of it. It embraced us. We were high on tactile stimulation and experience of senses. It took us a while to ground ourselves back even though we were so close to the ground.*

*This was the closest to Mount Merapi as I have been for the past 15 years, walking down the path my late father and I used to take. It was there and then when I realised that we got too close to the currently active volcano and did not know which way to go: we were lost!<sup>[5]</sup>*

[...]

The day when we, one of the artists and I, were lost in the forest, was the day we did the first of a series of field research conducted in the context of two art projects: *Pollination #3: Of Hunters and Gatherers*<sup>[6]</sup> and *900mdpl: Genealogy of Ghosts and How to Live with Them*.<sup>[7]</sup> Within the two-year period, from 2020 to 2022, a series of trips was undertaken on the southern slope of Mount Merapi. My research was rooted in and centred around the volcano, focusing on the idea of "local embodied knowledge" and how it can be a tool to exercise environmental sustainability of the area.<sup>[8]</sup> The research and learning process were mostly conducted through conversations with the elderly and gathering experiential knowledge by walking.

In Javanese, *mlaku* (to walk) is rooted in the word *laku* (translated as steps, as well as deeds). *Laku* does not only mean footsteps but also a learning process to understand the meaning of things as well as the hidden meanings behind it. *Laku* refers to learnings gained through bodily experiences under specific circumstances, as well as those passed down orally from one generation to another in the form of local rituals, ceremonies and embodied knowledge. *Laku* is inclusive and contains an element of internalising values by getting involved. It requires a progressive and stimulating process to reflect and learn about the harmony of humans' minds and the universe. Here, walking becomes a crucial step to take. To walk is to understand things a little better: through touch, sensorial experience, pondering and long conversations, and findings mythologically, philosophically and scientifically. This learning process is similar to that of Michel De Certeau's idea of walking as an elementary experience to turn a place into a practised space, a text one can read.<sup>[9]</sup>

Getting lost in the forest was a humbling experience. When we do so, we extend our boundaries and brave ourselves into a landscape that is foreign and new. Walter Benjamin once wrote that to be lost is to be fully present, and to be fully present is to be capable of being in uncertainty and mystery.<sup>[10]</sup> The experience may not be long or dramatic, but one may return home slightly changed after venturing into the unknown. Looking back, I remember how I entered the forest with the blissful awe of an outsider, ignorant to the fact that the route we blindly took might be leading us astray and closer to the dangerous volcano. Our confidence gave us a false sense of knowledge and security.

I am a native of the area, we had several conversations with the elderly prior to the walk and we trusted Google maps to guide our way. We thought we knew enough to venture into the forest by ourselves. When one thinks of a new landscape as a text,<sup>[11]</sup> the forest just a few kilometres from my village apparently translated into a foreign language.<sup>[12]</sup> The experience made me realise how distant I am to the embodied knowledge of my ancestor

After learning the hard way, we started taking different ‘translators’ of the landscape with us on our walks: a grass forager, a member of the search and rescue team, an agroforestry farmer, a tourist hiking guide, and so on. Those who work under Mount Merapi are the native speakers of its landscape who learned the language early in their life and eventually became fluent. I imagine how for them returning to the wilderness might feel like re-reading an old book or speaking in their mother tongue. Over time, their bodies became the unwritten archive of that site-specific knowledge. But when knowledge is transmitted orally or through embodied experience, what are the proper academic protocols and citation processes? Are stories and myths properly cited or considered and dismissed as backward or unmodern knowledge?

It made me think of a particular anecdote about Bu Pujo, the rare flower picker.<sup>[13]</sup> Bu Pujo was the right-hand woman of Mbah Maridjan, the late Custodian of Mount Merapi. She was always there by his side whenever a ritual took place. She was the “mother” who took care of climbers who were about to climb Mount Merapi. She was also the one who prepared the food and offerings for the annual procession of *Labuhan*.<sup>[14]</sup> When the *Labuhan* is finished and everyone is back in their house; Bu Pujo undertakes the crucial final task. In silence, she (and only she), shall travel along the untravelled route of Mount Merapi, all the way up the slippery lava bed of Watu Kemloso, to find two rare flowers to be given to the Sultan of Yogyakarta as proof that the ritual has been completed. She passed away after the lava flow following the massive volcanic eruption hit her village in 2010. The eruption also took the spiritual custodian, Mbah Maridjan, devastated 13 villages, damaged 867 hectares of forest land and killed more than 350 people. I can only wonder how she learned the secret path to search for the rare sacred flower. Did someone teach her how to read the “map”? Did her mother take her along the path when she was a little girl? Did she find the location where the rare flowers grew when she was foraging for grass? Did she ever pass along the knowledge of how to get there to others before she passed away?

The annual *labuhan* procession is a form of offerings by the Sultanate of Yogyakarta to his spiritual allies of the mythical kingdom of Mount Merapi at the North and the queendom of Nyi Roro Kidul of the Indian Ocean at the South. Yogyakarta is surrounded by those two unpredictable and potentially dangerous forces of nature and the *labuhan* procession is a way to ask for protection from the geological Gods and as a form of philosophical balance between human, God, and nature.

The ritual pathways of the *labuhan* procession to Mount Merapi have been used since the seventeenth century by the Islamic Mataram Kingdom.<sup>[15]</sup> Hundreds of people would gather every year to witness the

*labuhan* ceremony and follow the lead of the late spiritual custodian of Mount Merapi and his team on the mass walk. To walk along the ritual pathways of the *labuhan* ceremony is part of the *laku* for those who participate, whether for practical, philosophical, or spiritual reasons.

Even if Javanese mysticism has been integral to the daily life of people who live under Mount Merapi, the old debate and sentiments over “modern” science versus “backward” spirituality of Javanese “villagers’ mysticism” is perpetual. In this debate, “local embodied knowledge” is marginalised and perceived as inferior to that of science and volcanology, but historically that was not necessarily the case. Mysticism and science have subtly collaborated from the beginning. When colonial scientists started to forge the volcanology in Java in the early twentieth century, they took the same ritual pathways as those of the *labuhan*, accompanied by local *mantri* (researchers’ assistants) or *kuli* (porters) to do their fieldwork.<sup>[16]</sup> In his essay, Adam Bobette states that “Colonial scientific knowledge (though the scientists themselves were not always aware of it) was enabled and shaped by the spiritual geographies that preceded their arrival to central Java.”<sup>[17]</sup> It made me wonder how scientists incorporated the embodied knowledge of those who guided them. Can embodied local knowledge traverse beyond the realm of a footnote into a properly credited idea incorporated into the paper and equally acknowledged in academic essays? Is it even necessary to follow the same academic protocol for a completely different knowledge system?

#### Field Note cont’d

*We were lucky enough to find our way home despite our incapability to read the landscape. The experience reminded me of the local hearsays about a particular brother and sister Lik En and Lik Es. They were born of an esteemed family in Kaliurang. Their parents are known for their sincere generosity. By the age of 17, Lik En lost her mind and started wandering around the village aimlessly while speaking to herself. Lik Es sometimes let his mind derail before he even turned ten years old. The family takes care of Lik En whose story is less known to the public while her brother, Lik Es lived in a house in the middle of a dense neighbourhood, yet, he remains undisturbed by the world around him. His peculiarity left a mark on his neighbours who genuinely cared and loved him.*

*In 2015, Lik Es went on a walk to forage for grass at the slope of Merapi and never returned. People believe that he went missing somewhere near Hutan Bingungan (the Forest of Confusion) and yet to be found. For three months, the Search and Rescue (SAR) team went out to try to find him with no result. A year later, a local shaman believed that the spirit of Lik Es showed him the way and the search continued with no result. Later, people believe that he went into ‘another spatiality’.*

*People in the neighbourhood regularly clean the remnants of his house and his family never sold that piece of land believing that one day he might find his way back home. That belief was not without reason. The sister, Lik Es, lost in the same forest of Merapi several times. Sometimes she would walk into a forest at the slope of Mount Merapi and be found in another city around 50 km away from Kaliurang a few days later, reported by the local SAR team in that area. One time, she went missing for 3 years and then returned to Kaliurang like she only went on a walk for the day. Not so long before her brother went missing, she walked away and never returned. Probably the siblings were finally able to find a way to a special place that we*

*couldn't apprehend, learning the language of the place that no one else can.*

[...]

*Hutan Bingungan* or the “Forest of Confusion” is one of the many mythological forests located on the slopes of Mount Merapi.<sup>[18]</sup> Its proximity to the village made it accessible, and at the same time the myth kept it pristine and unspoiled. The forest is believed to be enchanted and cause confusion to people entering it, especially to untrained eyes. There are anecdotes and hearsay about different people's experience of getting confused due to sudden loss of their sense of direction. Some say it was as if the position of the volcano moved and the usual geological markers that we know cannot be trusted. Grass foragers and firewood collectors would enter in groups and have their own collective systems of navigating the forest and ensuring each other's safety. The elder in the group guide their way based on their embodied knowledge of the forest, while the younger remain vigilant and memorise the path where they came from. Should one of them get confused, they just need to turn back and locate the path they came from.

From the generation that grew up in Kaliurang in the 1940s, there is a story of another path, slightly deeper into the forest, that was once used as escape route by Javanese social bandits of the early twentieth century to transport stolen cows from a neighbouring small town on the other side of Mount Merapi, butcher it in the forest, and sell them to small businesses in Kaliurang.<sup>[19]</sup> They would steal from colonial elites and corrupt governments as a form of sociopolitical protest by the lower classes against repression, exploitation, and injustice of the colonial government's agrarian tax policy. After independence, this path was used by small traders and grass foragers but slowly abandoned as modern street infrastructure was built.

This time, I did not follow my curiosity directly into the forest (of Confusion); instead I sought answers from elderly who had experienced entering it themselves. To my surprise, there were more people around me who had entered the forest early in their lives, my uncle and mother among them. Back when they were young, in the 1960s, their grandmother used to take them there and taught them how to read the signs: how to spot a safe entrance, how many steps to take before turning to one's right or left never East-West because the height and density of the trees might make a person lose a sense of direction and more importantly, how to recognise the sign of a human footpath to follow instead of waterways, which can easily deceive untrained eyes. At first, their grandmother would lead the way and take them into the forest under her guidance. Later, they learned to recognise their way and start venturing around the nearest tip of the forest themselves.

This learning process is one of a Javanese embodied knowledge-transfer system, starting with *niteni* (to observe and sharpen one's sensitivity to natural signs, characteristics, and repeated observation to read natural phenomena), *niraoke* (to mimic), and *nambahi* (to add value and ensure timeliness and context in responding to natural events that have already been observed, understood, and controlled through the previous two steps).<sup>[20]</sup> The knowledge gained from this bodily experience is dynamic and changing as the landscape changes. It exists as long as the community needs it. When people no longer walk the pathways, the footprints of predecessors slowly fade away, become overgrown and wiped as the forest regenerates. The knowledge of the pathways is no longer needed to be passed on to the next generation. Hearsay about the forest became myth, and myth keeps the forest unknown and untouched.

Today, Hutan Bingungan is one of the last verges of virgin forests at the slopes of Mount Merapi among the massive sand-mining and tourism industry in the area.

Looking back at my initial question, to navigate local embodied knowledge within Western academic protocols may be similar to navigating Hutan Bingungan with a map: it does not work according to the same structures and one may get lost inside the “forest of confusion”. The nature of local embodied knowledge is non-definitive and regenerative. It was not about conquering or controlling; instead, it flows alongside changes in nature. It is not about discovery or clarity but more about the ongoing learning process, a *laku*, an ongoing flow, a landscape continuously rewritten. The protocols of a *laku* compared to rigid academic protocols are independent of each other. Each knowledge is valid and none is more superior than each other.

Every once in a while they may collide and collaborate to add value to each other. Until then, embodied knowledge has its own right to opacity.<sup>[21]</sup>

*Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.*

Édouard Glissant<sup>[22]</sup>



Figure 1: Ahmad Barokah, Merapi, 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of the artist.

## Footnotes

1. Kaliurang is a historical resort village in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, located 7 km from the caldera of Mount Merapi.
2. In 1912, the Dutch colonial government prohibited people from farming around the forest on the slopes of Mount Merapi and created a designated agroforestry area for them. In 1931, the area closer to the volcano became a conservation forest for the protection of water resources, rivers, and life support. See Triyoga, Lucas Sasongko. *Manusia Jawa Dan Gunung Merapi: Persepsi Dan Kepercayaan*, Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press. 1991. pp. 100–02. (Triyoga, 1991). In 2004, the Indonesian

government formally turned the colonial conservation forest into a National Park.

3. Mount Merapi, located on Java Island, is one of the most active volcanoes in the world. Its activity, proximity to the people, and spiritual significance has attracted many scientists and researchers since the colonial period. The volcano itself is never just historical but also social and political. It is believed to be one of the mythical kingdoms in the spiritual axis that form a connection between the Kingdom of Yogyakarta and the mythical Queendom of the Indian Sea.
4. In the part about *Touching and Being Touch: The Reciprocity of the Sensuous*, Abram explained Mearleau-Ponty's concept on the phenomenology of participation—that my hand is able to touch things only because the hand itself is a touchable thing, and thus is entirely a part of the tactile world that it explores. (Abram, 1996) See Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*. New York, NY: Vintage Books. 1996.
5. The government raised the activity status to level II after a phreatic eruption (caused by the heating of groundwater) on 11 May 2018. The most recent notable eruption dates 21 June 2020—and a higher intensity of volcanic and tectonic earthquakes was reported in the week when we did our first walk. A few weeks before this research report was finally written, the government raised the activity level of Mt. Merapi from Waspada (level II) to Siaga (level III). The highest activity level is Awas (level IV). The transition between each activity level varied. For example, the level II status had applied since 2018 and was only raised in 2020. During the previous big eruption in 2010, it took less than a week to raise the level from level II to level IV, which then lasted for three months. At level III, everyone within the radius of 5 km from the caldera needs to be ready to flee an upcoming eruption at any time. At level IV, no activity is allowed within a radius of 10 km from the caldera and all villagers must evacuate.
6. Commissioned by The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, the third edition of "Pollination", curated by LIR (Mira Asriningtyas & Dito Yuwono) together with Kittima Chareeprasit, titled "Of Hunters and Gatherers", is composed of an exhibition, symposia and dedicated website. See <https://ofhuntersandgatherers.com/> (accessed 2023-06-04).
7. 900mdpl is a site-specific biennial project in Kaliurang, initiated as an active attempt to create a growing socially-engaged archive of the village and to preserve the collective memories of its people. The "900mdpl" project brings together local and international artists for a research residency and production of a new work. The first edition (2017) was a 'family portrait' of the community and their living space. The second edition (2019) was an attempt to pinpoint the small village in the map of Indonesia's bigger history. The third edition (2022) looked at the relationship between folklore, ghost stories, and mythology with the current ecological issues and environmental sustainability of the area. See (<http://www.900mdpl.com/p/900mdpl.html>) (accessed 2023-05-24).
8. 'Local embodied knowledge' is here understood as 'local wisdom' within the Indonesian context; or as 'local spiritual knowledge' within the Thai context. Both these attempts at translating local words "kearifan lokal" and '๕๕๕๕ ๕๕ ๕๕๕๕๕๕๕๕ ๕๕๕๕๕' into English are, however, insufficient. In short, 'local embodied knowledge' refers to the practice of learning, whereby the body receives "practice" in specific sites, with specific rituals. It is understood that the experiential knowledge and its continuous presence in a community— via oral storytelling, spiritual or religious ritual, folkloric superstition —are undervalued or little taught within the dominant cultural memory of both countries. See (<https://ofhuntersandgatherers.com/curatorial-text-the-hunters/>) (accessed 2023-05-24).
9. De Certeau, Michel. "Walking in the City". In *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1988. pp. 91–110.
10. Benjamin, Walter. "A Berlin Chronicle." In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York, NY: Schocken, 1986..
11. Ibid.

12. Solnit, Rebecca. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books. 2017.
13. *I learned about Bu Pujo's story through Elizabeth D Inandiak's book, titled "Babad Ngalor Ngidul" and it fascinates me how the crucial care work that Bu Pujo did is less known or talked about compared to the role of the Custodian. Source: Inandiak, Elizabeth D. Babad Ngalor Ngidul. (Yogyakarta: KPG, 2016.)*
14. *On the anniversary of the Sultan's coronation, offerings (Labuhan) are brought from the Keraton of Yogyakarta to Mount Merapi, together with similar offerings carried to the Indian Ocean, to appease the spirits of the mountain and the sea, in order to bring welfare to the inhabitants of Java. The Labuhan Alit (small labuhan) is done annually and the Labuhan Ageng (grand labuhan) is done every eight years. See [https://id.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labuhan\\_Alit\\_Keraton\\_Yogyakarta](https://id.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labuhan_Alit_Keraton_Yogyakarta) (accessed 2023-06-04).*
15. Safana, Nadia Farah. "Labuhan Merapi: Mensyukuri Karunia Tuhan Melalui Wajah Yogyakarta". 6 April 2022. Available at <https://budaya.jogjaprov.go.id/berita/detail/LabuhanMerapi> (accessed 2023-04-06).
16. Bobbette, Adam. "A Javanese Anthropocene.". Anthropocene curriculum. Available at <https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org/contribution/a-javanese-anthropocene> (accessed 2023-05-01).
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Other than Hutan Bingungan, there are the more inaccessible mythological forests on the cusp between myth and reality, such as Hutan Patuk Alap-Alap, Hutan Gamelan, Hutan Pijen, and Hutan Blumbang. It is believed that some mythical animals that belong to the Sovereign of Mount Merapi live there. See: Triyoga, Lucas Sasongko. Manusia Jawa Dan Gunung Merapi: Persepsi Dan Kepercayaan, 100-102. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1991. pp. 100-02.*
19. *The term, social bandits, was invented by Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm and introduced in his books Primitive Rebels (1959) and Bandits (1969). This type of social crime as a form of resistance and class struggle was widespread in Java from 1850 until 1942, especially in Banten-Batavia, Surakarta-Yogyakarta, and Pasuruan-Probolinggo. See: Pranoto, Suhartono W. Jawa: Bandit-Bandit Pedesaan: Studi Historis 1850--1942. Yogyakarta: Graha Ilmu, 2010.*
20. *After the series of walks for the Pollination project, I wrote an essay that touches upon the idea of a Javanese knowledge transmission system, which is available at <https://ofhuntersandgatherers.com/grandchildren-of-the-volcano-gather-around/> (accessed 2023-06-04). The idea of the three N (Niteni, Niroake, Nambahi) is that of a local Javanese knowledge transmission system famously used by Indonesian activist Ki Hadjar Dewantara or Raden Mas Soewardi Soerjaningrat, though no direct written reference by Soerjaningrat can be found. See: Sumiyati, and Sri Adi Widodo. "Pengaruh Konsep 3N "Niteni, Nirokke, Nambahi" Terhadap Prestasi Belajar Matematika Ditinjau dari Keaktifan Siswa Kelas X SMK". PDF. Yogyakarta: UST., 2018. Available at <https://jurnal.ustjogja.ac.id/index.php/etnomatnesia/article/view/2414> (accessed 2023-06-04).*
21. *In his book, Glissant demands for the right to opacity, within the theory of difference, against the reductive thoughts of transparency. He argues, "Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. [...] Every Other is a citizen and no longer a barbarian. What is here is open, as much as this there. I would be incapable of projecting from one to the other. This-here is the weave, and it weaves no boundaries. The right to opacity would not establish autism; it would be the real foundation of Relation, in freedoms." See: Glissant, Édouard. "For Opacity". In Poetics of Relation. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021. pp. 189--194.*
22. *Glissant, Édouard. "Transparency and Opacity". In Poetics of Relation,. University of Michigan Press, 2021. p. 111.*

