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# MYTH OF PUBLIC ASPIRATION FUND: ETHNO-SEMIOTICS STUDY ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT BUDGETING

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This study was intended to study how the public aspiration funds as one of local government budgeting realities was interpreted with regard to the context of socio-political relations and institutions. This study used interpretive-critical paradigm for the study of ethno-semiotics-based on philosophy of Roland Barthes. The result of this research provided an understanding that the public aspiration fund was created by legislative as their rationality of responsibility to struggle for public aspirations. Public aspiration fund was then “deposited” on local budgets as the “legitimacy” that the public aspiration has been “implemented” through the programs or activities in each work unit. At the micro level the public aspiration fund was connoted as: deposit funds, pork barrel, political, budgeting actor inspiration, loss of meaning, no impact. At the macro level, the public aspiration funds became a myth that seems very “natural” as the fulfillment of “holy” obligations of the budgeting actors, but behind it there was a “selfish” motivation, opportunistic, pragmatic for self-interest, political, and imaging, and finally described the ideology of how the legislative domination in budgetary area. The public aspiration fund has diffused as a narration created for an interest, became a ritual in local budgeting and eventually became sacred. The public aspiration fund has become simulacra which produced counterfeit, hades from the reference and creates a mark as a mask, veil, camouflage, or a mirage.

**Keywords:** Myth, Public aspiration fund, Local government budgeting, Ethno-semiotics, Roland Barthes

## PROLOGUE: POLITICAL ACTORS THE MYTH CREATORS

Politics is considered as a way of having something legitimate (Reardon, 2002), emphasizes the process, and the relationship regardless of structure or formal authority. Politics exist where there is interdependence and diversity of means, goals, and values (Hill, 1994). Politics

consists of activities to acquire, develop, and use the force and other resources to get the desired result (Gautschi, 1997) that could potentially lead to political conflict. Political conflicts can occur over resources, budgets, responsibilities, and others. Politicians have many ways to influence and control the bureaucracy like administrative procedures, budget control and supervision.

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Politics makes people relate to the source of power (Reardon, 2002).

An important element in political maneuvering is creating meaning through a belief of the importance of events, problems, crises, and policy changes. If political language is a political reality, it is challenging to examine the complex relationship between language and meaning. Political language does not originate from the description of the "real world" but over the reconstruction and revival of the past being difficult to observe in the present and potentials in future. The enticement of political argument depends on how sensitive the political argument to rationalize the public social situation rather than rationality inherent in the language, where the rationality is constructed (Edelman, 1985).

Actions of political actors as myth has attracted the attention of political scientists, historians, and anthropologists (Munz, 1956). Political order requires "symbolic values, where people of different ideas, origin, continuity, memories, history, collectivity, heritage and traditions, and the same fate" provided by myth (Obradovic, 1996). Myth makes itself look innocent and neutral, not because the myth hide its intention, but because it is natural intention. Myth gives natural illusion, because the images it produced is "natural" and evoke the desired concept according clarity of facts but not explanations. Myth imposes meaning on the human experience in a complex social design (Zaidi, 2008).

One of the main objectives of a political myth is to generate legitimacy for the political power. For most political myths, they generally refer to creating a sense of belonging and generate consensus for the use of political power. Myth is

a device that helps to maintain the political status quo for public welfare and to ensure the effective social system (Day 1984). It provides the origin of an event and therefore allows control and manipulation of an event Eliade (1963). Myth is important to legitimize what they do, not what they say; and what political myths do provide narration drawn from the facts to understand why political authority is being used (Barthes, 1995). Thus, one of the main objectives of a political myth is to generate legitimacy for political power. The importance of political myths can be found in the fact that all political powers will attempt to tell a story and spot in their own way, so that the truth or falsity of the myth is not in question.

## TRACING PUBLIC ASPIRATION FUND

Aspiration fund is a popular name for budget policy Golkar Party ever afforded for reasons of development acceleration in the electoral district of Parliament (DPR), the proposed aspiration fund reaches Rp 15 billion for each electoral district or Rp 8.4 trillion per year. This policy of course raises "furor" because the polemics it creates. In budget meeting of Parliament (DPR) in the preliminary talks about the State Budgeting Draft (RAPBN) in 2011, in Jakarta, the proposal was set to be officially proposed, but some factions in the Parliament (DPR) rejected the proposal. Because of the proposal being rejected, the name was changed to the program of local development acceleration and equitability through constituency-based policy.

Rejection of the aspiration fund proposal because it referred to as "pork barrel", which is prone to corruption or simply meet politicians piggy bank. The term "pork barrel" refers to spending managed by politicians or Council

members to their constituents in the exchange of the political support, either in the form of campaign or votes in the general election. The purpose is to get further votes or opportunity in the next general elections. this political practice gets continual critics because it tends to favor private interest rather than the public interest as well as prone to fraud and misdirected.

Discourse of aspiration fund was raised again by Parliament (DPR) in the period of 2014-2019 amounted to Rp20 billion for every member of the council or Rp11.2 billion per year for the State Budget (APBN) in 2016. The legitimacy used by Parliament (DPR), that the rights and obligations of Council members is to propose and fight for electoral districts development programs. Thought aspiration fund never cease discourse by legislative, but it seem the “spirit” of this aspiration fund has long been practiced as part of local budgeting process. Public aspiration has appeared to become a “symbol” to rationalize their existence as public representative. Strong efforts have been made by the “representatives” to fight for the public aspiration “funds” despite stout opposition. Rejection of the public aspiration funds was not only by some members of legislative, government (executive), but also by the public who became the “object” of the aspiration fund.

This study becomes important and interesting to explore the relationship between the “public aspiration fund” created by budgeting actors as a symbol of their functions in local government budgeting and the reality shown in the local government budget. Local government budgeting as a result of social construction can not be separated from the social structure, ie how the meaning associated with local government budgeting spread to all the stakeholders’ interest of the local government budgeting. Through ethno-semiotic approach, this research will dig

the meaning of “community of readers” of local budgeting associated with the public aspiration fund.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative and uses interpretive-critical paradigm with the study of ethno-semiotics based on philosophy of Roland Barthes. McIntyre (1995) stated that interpretive paradigm provides knowledge of reality, including human action domain as a social construction by human actors. In the context of post-structuralist discourse, this study views the local budget as social objects that have implications and politics and power relations inherent in it. Semiotic developed by Barthes connects a text with macro structure (Myth, ideology) of a society that Piliang (2012) further called ethno-semiotics.

Levels of signs and meanings in Barthes’ semiotic can be described as follows:

Sign → Denotation → Connotation (code) → Myth
Source: Piliang (2012), <i>Semiotics and Hypersemiotic: Code, Style and Death of Meaning</i>

When a sign or text is viewed in its social dimension, it would require two levels of analysis: first, micro-analysis involving direct experience in everyday life of people facing the signs or text. Second, macro analysis related to socio-political relations and institutional context behind the sign or text. At the macro level, interpretive approach undergoes a transformation towards a critical approach (Piliang, 2012),.

## PUBLIC ASPIRATION FUND: A POPULIST POLICY

Jati (2014) stated that electoral process of region and Council members is one part of democracy

capitalization, where the affinity and affiliation of candidates or political parties and even imagery politic is an important key to maximizing the voters. Considering both problems, to exploit all sources of electoral votes, the candidates or parties may issue a populist policies to attract voters to choose them. The populist policies can also be realized in the forms of sporadic and transient “public aspiration fund” or “social aids” to help the difficulty of certain communities. However, populist policies can also be realized in the form of promises as “initial commitment” of the politicians to their constituents in implementing certain policies, if they are elected and have the power as a public populist. The populist policies are prone to be hidden campaign project.

Politicians and political parties tend to build a personal reputation to provide benefits for the targeted individual or local constituencies, which have encouraged the development of friendly personality figure by spreading social aids (Shin, 2011). However, since responsibility for the budget use is not transparent to public, then the actor will cover the budget objectives and benefits of the budget use on behalf of the public. The term “public” was politicized for a particular purpose. This practice is a manifestation of political corruption that occurs in formal legal relationship. Discussions about populist policies issued by the regime is a form of dilemmatic value between politicization and technocratic process. Budget politicization was shown to be reelected. They want to take advantage from the issue of populist policy to increase popularity in the eyes of their constituents directly and quickly.

The results of this research provide an understanding that public aspiration fund may

cause the programs and activities as the “object” of public aspirations ineffective to achieve the goals and objectives of the program or activity on the local budgeting. Legislative intend to affect the public budget with not only maintain the program and priorities for funding, but also how it was “deposited” through an executive agency.

## **MICRO ANALYSIS: VIEWPOINT OF BUDGET ACTOR AND SOCIETY**

Semiotic approach in cultural studies is one way to take the feature of surface behavior and not as something to collect studies in themselves, but as something to be interpreted with the aim to distinguish the structure of meaning used in creation and usage by social actors (Boland, 1985). This culture was then understood as a process in which the actors utilize and modify the structure of meaning in their daily interactions. In line with Giddens’ view, the budget is essentially a cultural product in a social system, where the budget actors perform a random access, perform self-monitoring, self-modification, face-to-face interaction and communication at micro level.

Not Aspiration Fund but Aspiration Program: Viewpoint of Local Council Members

Legislative be always behind the argument that public aspirations funds is intended for equitable of “justice” and society well-being in “constituency” and they do not manage the funds, but the local governments do. According to one member of local Parliament (DPRD) in South Sulawesi Province “program was obtained from a revisiting to electoral district. So, public aspiration is not really a council aspiration but public aspiration submitted to Council members and becomes a responsibility for legislators as

the public representatives to realize the aspiration in the form of development. “

The research results provide an understanding that the policy of public aspirations fund in local budgeting has shown how the legislature has created a symbol that indicates their responsibilities as public representatives to fight for the public aspirations they represent. The sign of public aspiration fund operating on denotation territory as a “common sense” is that the aspiration fund is urgently needed for local development.

### **Connotative Meaning of Public Aspiration Fund: Viewpoint of Bureaucrats and Society**

In the viewpoint of bureaucrats, public aspirations fund is defined as deposited fund “locker”. Deposited fund is connoted as a fund owned and controlled by the “depositor”. Budget and work program on local government unit is defined as “locker” or vessel where the aspiration fund will be placed. It is understandable that the “depositor” and the side whom the fund is “deposited” may each take part in the “allocated” fund as “locker funds”. As noted by the Chairman of Advocacy Division of Legislative Oversight Committee (KOPEL) of Sulawesi that “there could be a conspiracy between Council members and local government unit, since the fund is allocated to each local government unit, in accordance with the relationship of each program or project related to the deposited funds.”

The study provides an understanding of how the public aspiration fund will be defined by society. First, the public aspiration fund as “pork barrel”. Particular pork barrel does not frequently touch the available root of society problems, because segmented only to particular recipients

who may be considered as loyal voters. The pork barrel is then inherited in political practice as something that “must” be done. The local budget actors who take “part” of public aspiration fund will at the end have the benefits for themselves and their political careers, and not as they believe that the project they fight for the real benefit of society.

Second, the public aspiration fund as image politic. The practice of public aspiration fund has developed into image politic, in which the local budget actors understand as society savior. The local budgets actors who take “part” from public aspiration fund will in the end bring benefits to themselves and their political careers, and not because they believe that the project they fight for is real benefit to society. Third, public aspiration fund as stomach gas (the practice exists, but difficult to prove). Public aspiration fund has become part of all funds managed by local government unit. This makes it very difficult to find the conspiracy in the use of the public aspiration fund.

Fourth, public aspiration fund as an interest conspiracy. Conspiracy in management of public aspiration fund has become part of the culture of “budget politic” that was enjoyed “together” that to trace its impact on society in accordance with the purpose of the aspiration program is not easy. Fifth, public aspiration fund as inspiration fund. The public aspiration program has become the inspiration for the local budget actors to allocate a number of public funds public to finance the programs or activities referred to the public interests, but it was eventually used as part of political incentives and private interests.

Sixth, public aspiration fund as a “mustache shear effect”. As the phenomenon of “shaving

mustache”, the effect is only visible after being “shaved” but after that it will show up again. Public aspiration fund has not been felt comprehensively and considered be enjoyed only by a group of community or the budgeting actors. The public aspiration fund was still allocated in the program or activity that is less impact on public welfare. Seventh, according to the NGO Indonesian Forum for Budget Transparency (FITRA), 10 reasons to reject the aspiration funds (Seknas FITRA, 2010), among others: because the aspiration funds nourish the budget brokers, zoom in poverty between regions, disrupt the planning system of budgeting and financial balance, not correspond to performance-based budget approach, contrary to the principle of equalization funds, causing inefficient budget, no legal basis, not political incentives, the Parliament (DPR) does not have the budget right, and perpetuating the status quo.

Meaning by bureaucrats and community is in connotative level. In connotative level, the purpose of public aspirations fund is to provide codes that mark to diverse meanings affected by the social context of readers (bureaucrats and society). Connotative sign does not only has additional significance, but it also contains the two parts of denotative signs that underlie its existence.

## **MYTH OF PUBLIC ASPIRATION FUND: MACRO ANALYSIS**

Barthes suggested myth as a kind of narration. As a narration, myth is a sequence of language. Language plays an important role in communication. In relation to communication, Barthes also described the myth as a communication system, that it is a message and never be an object, a concept, or an idea. Myth is

a model of designation, i.e., a form. In relation to local budget politics, public aspiration fund has been “created” by the budgeting actors to express their identity as “public representatives” to fight for the public interest they represent and entrusts to bureaucrats the management to “serve” the public interests. Semiotics at the micro level indicates that the aspiration fund has solely become a tool of “impressions” of the budgeting actors to improve their political image.

Public aspirations fund has become part of local budgeting politic that is attempted to maintain, although it then gets criticism from the public. Sala (2010) said that to have the political myths survived, it must be able to adapt through times of change. Political myths need storytellers who have the capacity to create and maintain it to become relevant; so how the myth continues to live, where they came from, is an important way to understand how legitimacy is generated (Bell, 2003). Myth needs social actors to take their lives and ensure that they can continue to tell the story. But if the civil servants choose to produce and promote their own myths, then the legitimacy of political power may be questionable. The public aspiration fund has been operating in “myth”. To explore how the public aspiration fund “mutated” into myth. Myth evolution of public aspiration fund involves three phases: diffusion, rituals and sacred (Bouchard, 2007).

## **DIFFUSION PHASE**

In the first phase, diffusion shows various actors seeking some advantage through certain narrative diffusion, for example through politic campaign or promotion or campaign politics. Diffusional process may happen using imitation techniques. Meyer and Rowan (1977) said that myth was generated by particular organizational

practices and diffuses through relational networks that have legitimacy based on the assumption that they are rational. But many myths have also official legitimacy by legal mandates. Authority of executive, legislative, and judicial create and interpret mandates according to legislation. The stronger the rational-legal order, the greater the rules, procedures, and personnel be rationalized institutional requirements.

The results of this research provide an understanding that discourse of public aspiration fund is basically started from "politics" desire to get a number of "allocated" funds for the benefit of "public" in the constituency of each council member with the reasons for regional equity. Public aspiration fund in some views is considered "similar" to "pork barrel" that has also been practiced by some countries such as United States and Philippines. It has become the reason of politic "narration" in the regions, as an effort to bridge the recess results of the Council members to bring forward the public aspirations in the local budgeting structure and become part of an important mechanism of local budgeting. At this stage the public aspiration fund has shown its existence.

Piliang (2009) stated that politics has become the "the politics of image" which celebrates the image rather than political competence. In political simulacra, all potential signs, images, and spectacle; all language power; symbolic power are deployed to build image, form public opinion, change perception, control mass consciousness, and directs political preferences although all of them are not more than mere simulacra cortege. Public aspiration fund has become similar to a carca which produces all false, deviates from the reference to create a sign as a mask, veil, camouflage, or mirage.

## RITUAL PHASE

In the second phase, myth of public aspiration fund has become a ritual in discourse and practice of local budgeting politic. According to Crowther (2002) budget generated in an organization for decision-making and performance evaluation provides an example of kinds of rituals that shape organizational behavior and give legitimacy to the decisions based on the ritual. Budgeting ritual cannot only become regular formal behavior, but also informal behavior patterns based on the norms of behavior developed over time.

Political cycle of local budgets shows how the budgeting mechanism conducted by local government through a series of strategic planning system started from the process of planning, budgeting until the phase of local budget implementation. Result of the process undertaken by the local government is then coupled also by process of trawling public aspiration by local Parliament (DPRD) through a recess activity. At this point, the interests are satisfied and compromise in bonding "romance" to determine the "Pareto optimum" politically agreed by both the team of Local Government Budget and Parliament Budget Agency (Banggar), for one purpose of "public interest" as their main tasks, functions and responsibilities.

Public aspiration fund has also become part of local budget politics through informal behavior patterns between local Parliament (DPRD) through their fittings, namely commissions with local governments through local government unit. At this phase, the public aspiration fund obtains a decent place, become part of local budgeting ritual. Olsen (1970) confirmed that a political ritual can activate the policy of political power and



provide basis for social conflict. In this aspect, myth and ritual are disciplinary instruments toward legalization of political power on one side and becomes a symbol of illegality on the other side. Edelman (1985) said that the most prominent in the institution of “democratic” and forms of public participation in government is largely symbolic and expressive. One hypothesis is that the powerful organized interests will gain material benefits, while those unorganized will gain symbolic guarantee.

## SACRED PHASE

According to Day (1984), Attribute of myth is that the myth is considered sacred. Myth needs symbol, and symbol “does not represent an external reality, but psychic and spiritual reality”. Symbol is ambivalent and produces rich meanings and confusing. The meaning of a symbol is built by symbol users, and may mean different things to different users. Dowden (1992) indicated that the symbol is formed of a shared cultural myth. Symbol is part of myth, which allows the resurrection, suggestions and transformation.

Myth becomes sacred when it was questionable because of increasing doubts toward government or politicians (Bouchard, 2007). The myth of public aspiration fund has become the “hidden” area of society. Discussion of the budget is not only conducted through formal meetings in accordance with the agenda of discussion designed by Parliament together with local government in the “public house” that shows how “different interests” are shown, but also through “informal” meetings that shows how “the same interest” is shown to jointly “secure” the public aspirations fund in a “locker” where only “depositor” and those whom the fund “deposited” knows. Public aspiration fund becomes sacred

in the territory “of local budget politics” where “people” attached to the funds has lost its “essence”. When, the discourse of good government governance is constantly looking for the place through the concept of accountability and transparency on one side and on other side the public aspirations fund “solidify” its existence as a myth, then as a public informant said that “the people must have been very unwilling if their “aspiration” is sold for the benefit of personal or group of the representatives themselves.

## CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, AND LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

At discourse level, public aspiration fund is used as one of “rational” argument to realize Parliament actions to “answer” public desire and to fulfill “political promises” when campaigning and recess activities in electoral district. At practical level, public aspiration fund was “deposited” on local budgets as “legitimacy” that the public aspiration has been “implemented” through the programs or activities in each work unit area.

At denotation level, the public aspiration fund is interpreted as an attempt to realize a number of programs included in local budgets as a result of assembling public aspirations by Parliament during recess activities. For the Council members, public aspiration was an indication of their effort to fight for the public and become a solid foundation in affecting the local budget allocation. Based on semiotics reading at micro level, it indicates that the fund aspiration has solely become a tool of “impressions” of the budget actors to improve their political image. At macro level, the public aspiration fund has been operating in the spot of “myth”. It diffuses through

relational networks of budget actors who have legitimacy based on the assumption that they are rational. The public aspirations fund gains a decent place to be part of local budgeting ritual and eventually become sacred. At this point the public aspirations fund will be dealing with public who are “concerned” over the fund.

## IMPLICATION

As policy implications, aspiration fund becomes part of totality of the design of on local budgeting process. The practice so far shows that the level of accountability and transparency of the management of public aspiration fund is very low, because the amount of allocated aspiration fund is unknown and only becomes part of “negotiation” between the local government and local Parliament (DPRD) through local budgeting mechanism. The theoretical implication of this study indicates that local budgeting is not only observed in behavioral context, but can be developed in a broader perspective to observe the psychological, social and political impacts.

## LIMITATION

The limitations of this study include: first, the selection of signs in local budgeting associated with narcissism tendency. This study only select public aspiration fund as one of hyper-signifier elements of sign. In the analysis of texts or signs with semiotic approach it is useable of all texts created and established in local budgeting.

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