

# The local wisdom of the coastal community of Bakaran Village, Central Java, Indonesia, in maintaining rice to improve the food security

RAHMAN LATIF ALFIAN<sup>✉</sup>, BUDIAWATI SUPANGKAT ISKANDAR, BUDI GUNAWAN

Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Padjadjaran. Jl. Raya Bandung - Sumedang Km 21, Hegarmanah, Jatinangor, Sumedang 45363, West Java, Indonesia. Tel.: +62-22-7796416. ✉email: rahmanlatif927@gmail.com

Manuscript received: 18 April 2018. Revision accepted: 31 May 2018.

**Abstract.** Alfian RL, Iskandar BS, Gunawan B. 2018. The local wisdom of the coastal community of Bakaran Village, Central Java, Indonesia, in maintaining rice to improve the food security. *Asian J Ethnobiol* 1: 47-52. Based on tradition, Bakaran Village, Juwana, Pati, Central Java has prohibited (pantang) to sell the cooked rice (*nasi*). This prohibition or *Pantangan* of the Bakaran community appears to be due to *Nyai Ageng Bakaran*, the village's founder. The present study aimed to elucidate the meaning of prohibition (*pantangan*) on the selling of cooked rice and its functions for improving food security in the village. The qualitative with ethnographical and ethnoecological approach was applied in this study. Several techniques were carried out, namely the observation, participant observation, the in-depth interview, and the literature study. The study shows that the *Pantangan* of selling the cooked rice was initially undertaken based on a story of *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* that provided a message to his community not to sell the cooked rice and better share it with others. This *Pantangan* has some meaning and values, such as instilling the importance of mutual sharing, helping, and caring among the community members. In addition, *Pantangan* teaches that prosperity is not always measured with money, but keeping people away from starving is a form of prosperity. The *Pantangan* functions as one of how the Bakaran community ensures the security of food needs. Indeed, the *Pantangan* also served as a form of actualization of their identity.

**Keywords:** Cultural identity, cooked rice, Pati, prohibition of selling, symbolic meaning

## INTRODUCTION

Eating food as an activity and basic need cannot be separated from human life. Biologically, humans need food as a source of energy to sustain their life. The fulfillment of the essential requirement of food as the primary commodity becomes the right of every people (Suyastiri 2008). The realization of food security has a strategic role in national development (Budiyanto 2010).

The food materials provided by the ecosystems are continuously utilized to support human life. The intense interrelationship between local people and their environment to fulfill their food needs have created cultural adaptations to the local environment. This is because culture is a medium through which the interactions and transformations with the climate are gained while solving various problems. Any actions that result in the collective memory of the human groups are stored to retrieve the knowledge for the future (Maida 2011).

The discussion of eating, food, fulfillment of food needs, and human adaptations cannot be separated from ethnobiology, which classically studies interactions between people and their environment (Albuquerque and Alves 2016). Ethnobiology may be defined as the study of the knowledge of a particular ethnic group on plants, animals, nature, and related things (Anderson 2011). Today, ethnobiological research has become more complex, and it has been developing relationships between biology and cultural diversity (Ellen 2006). It explores the management of the natural resources, such as flora, fauna,

and local ecosystem by the local community, based on the integration of aspects of the social systems. That includes the local knowledge or the traditional ecological knowledge, beliefs, perceptions, local languages, and other social factors and the ecosystems (Iskandar 2016). One of the focuses of ethnobiological research is the utilization and management of ecosystems about food production and consumption (Anderson 2011).

In the socio-cultural context, food has a broader meaning than just being a mere source of nutrients (cf. Minnis 2000). For example, the study on the food of the indigenous community of Jae revealed that, in addition to nutrition, food is also related to belief, status, prestige, solidarity, and serenity (Apomfires 2002). This study also showed that type and variety the food is deliberately selected, and they become the folk medicine system. The survey of the practice of eating of the Minahasa people indicated that the eating activity is a practice that forms the biological and social identity by showing the connection of the Minahasa people to their ancestors and the land where they lived, and their incorporation into the Christian community (Weichart 2004). Food is the primary identity marker of Minahasa people, separating them from others who do not have the same tradition.

In addition, another researcher also mentioned almost similarly that food plays an essential role in building family ties in various community groups in Southeast Asia. The tradition of giving each other among community members has vital meaning for building kinship ties. The community shares food among the still alive people, but the food is

commonly used as an offering to the deceased ancestors in traditional ceremonies. Thus, food has an important role and can be the basis for strengthening kinship relations and can play a role as an identity in describing the relationships between related groups in their relationships to share food with various community groups in Southeast Asia (Janowski 2007).

Another research mentions that the food in almost all communities of Southeast Asia is an essential basis for building relationships with relatives. It is the center of the development of kinship between people who are alive and with the deceased ancestors. Food also becomes an identity in describing the relationship of groups of related people (Janowski 2007).

The discussion of eating by Javanese people cannot be separated from their staple food, namely the cooked rice (*nasi*). Cooked rice has become the main staple food for most of Southeast Asia (Janowski 2007). The cooked rice is always served in each ritual or ceremony and daily life. This is reflected in the study on rice ritual kinship identities and ethnicity in Central Flores, which mentions that the rice and the cooked rice are the prestigious food sources of Central Flores. In the agricultural ritual, the cooked rice is as important as the currency exchange, and it is also offered to the ancestors, the nature spirits, and gods. In addition, the consumption of rice shows the level of a person's social class in the community (De Jong 2007). The cooked rice is mainly used as a source of nutritious food. It can also be used in several prestigious ceremonies in agricultural activities and rituals for the human life cycle in a family and has contributed to the construction and transformation of kinship and ethnicity identities.

For Bakaran Village, Juwana Sub-district, Pati District, Central Java, Indonesia, cooked rice is perceived as a foodstuff that cannot be considered arbitrary. The community of Bakaran Village has traditional wisdom about cooked rice. They have a past story related to the village founder, namely *Nyai Ageng Bakaran*, who escaped from the Kingdom of Majapahit. The Bakaran community has prohibited (*pantangan*) selling cooked rice based on this story.

This paper discusses the meaning and the functions of local wisdom regarding the prohibition (*pantangan*) of selling cooked rice in the Bakaran community, Pati, Central Java, Indonesia.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Location

This research was conducted in Bakaran Village, Juwana Sub-district, Pati District, Central Java, Indonesia. The village of Bakaran has situated approximately 3 km to the west of the central government of Juwana sub-district, Pati district, Central Java (Figure 1). The village of Bakaran was divided into two new villages, Bakaran Wetan and Bakaran Kulon, after the Indonesian independence. Today, although the village has been administratively divided into two separate villages, the local people consider themselves as belonging to the community of Bakaran

Village. This is because Nyi Ageng Bakaran undertook the ecological history of establishing Bakaran Village by cutting and burning the forest. As a result, they still consider themselves the descendants of Nyai Ageng Bakaran and belong to one culture of the Bakaran community. In this study, the two administrative villages are considered Bakaran Village.

According to ecological history, this village was established by *Nyai Ageng* by burning forests, and therefore, the village's name is Bakaran which means burning. In addition, initially, the extent of the village was determined by the area to which the burning ash of the forest vegetation spread. It was told that the wind carried the burning ash up to the Java Sea. As a result, the Bakaran Village is stretched from South to North to the Java Sea. Since Bakaran is a coastal area, most people are brackish fish farmers. The northern region of Bakaran Village has functioned as a brackish pond area located close to the Java sea (Figure 2. A).

The local people have commonly raised the milky fish (*bandeng*) and shrimps (*udang*). The middle part of Bakaran Village is used as a settlement and a central village administrative area. The territory of Bakaran Village is in the form of a cluster. Meanwhile, the southern region of Bakaran Village is a small part that is used for wet-rice fields farming (Figure 2. B).

The people of Bakaran Village, particularly the women, in addition to involving in agricultural activities, are also engaged in the handicraft activity of making *batik* (*pembatik*) (Figure 3).

Recently, the demand for *batik* production in Bakaran Village has increased. It has also been influenced by the local government's policy of Pati district, which has declared that the typical *batik* cloth of Pati district or Bakaran *batik* cloth must be used as formal office clothing of the Pati district. The average level of education of the Bakaran community is registered as the senior high school (SMA). The illiteracy level of Bakaran Village is low.

The majority of the Bakaran community people are Muslims by religion, and a small number are Christians and Buddhists. Islam is predominantly considered part of the Nahdatul Ulama (NU). Consequently, the community has primarily practiced various traditional rituals, such as *ngalab berkah* to *punden* (pilgrimage to the founder sacred grave of the village or *ziarah ke makam* or *petilasan pendiri desa*), *slametan*, or *menjaga leluhur*, which are considered as traditions of the pre-Islamic time. This phenomenon is strongly influenced by the history that, in the past, the Bakaran Village was one of the centers of the believers of the Javanese origin (*Kejawen*).

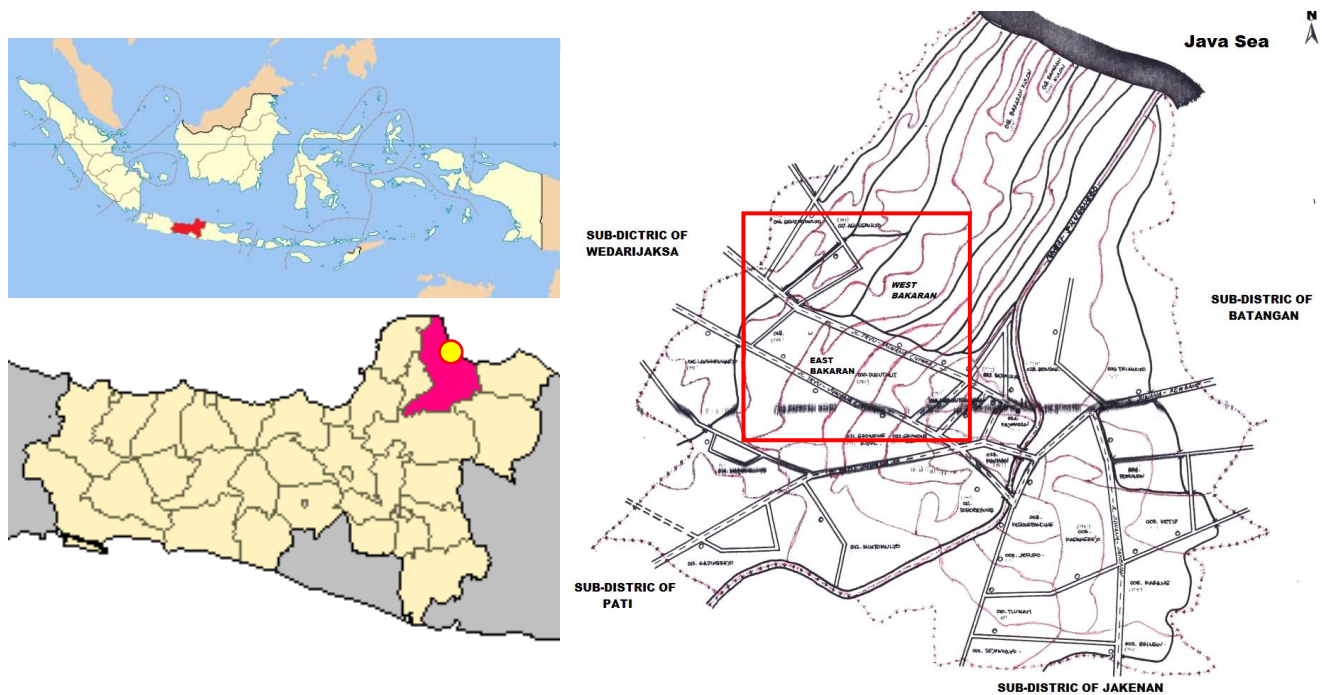
The staple food of the Bakaran community is cooked rice. Although the *sawah* areas are not as big as the brackish pond (*tambak*), the community of Bakaran Village has enough cooked rice. The rice is internally produced by the community and obtained from the Juwana sub-district market. In addition, according to the local wisdom of the village community of Bakaran, there is a prohibition on the selling of cooked rice, due to which rice stock has been continuously maintained.

## Method

The method used in this study was qualitative with an ethnographical and ethnobiological or ethnoecological approach (Spradley 2007; Iskandar 2012; Albuquerque et al. 2014). The ethnography approach was applied as the essence of ethnography is to pay attention to the meaning of events in an individual or community that is to be understood (Spradley 2007). In addition, the ethnography technique is also used to understand the indigenous or traditional people about their life or to get their worldview (Malinowski 1922 cited by Spradley 2007). Meanwhile, ethnobiology or ethnoecology emerged as that branch of

the new ethnography that describes people's conceptual model of their environment (Milton 1996).

Several techniques, mainly observation, participant observation, and in-deep interviews, were applied in this study. The observation is undertaken to obtain data on the local environmental conditions of the settlement area, the brackish fish pond area, and the wet rice field. The participant observation was applied to observe and involve the researcher with various activities of the informants, including the daily eating of cooked rice, uses of the cooked rice, and the traditional rituals of the Bakaran community. In addition, a deep interview was conducted



**Figure 1.** Location of the study area in Bakaran Village, Juwana Sub-district, Pati District, Central Java, Province, Indonesia



**Figure 2.** A. The brackish pond of the Bakaran Village. B. The wet-rice field (sawah) of the Bakaran Village



**Figure 3.** The women of the Bakaran Village engaged in 'batik' craft

With the competent informants who were purposively selected by the snowball sampling. The informants selected were the older adults (*sesepuh*), the formal staff (the village staff), and the informal leaders (*tokoh masyarakat*). The in-depth interview was considered an important tool to understand various aspects and activities about the prohibition of selling the cooked rice and crosschecking the data obtained through observation and participant observation (Koentjaraningrat 1991).

The analysis of data is intended to look for patterns (Spradley 2007), in addition, to determine the social basis of the existing structure (Geertz 2016). The study of information consisted of four activities: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and making conclusions or verification (Miles and Huberman 1992). Moreover, to make a narration, some activities were carried out: cross-checking, summarizing, synthesizing, and making descriptive and evaluative narration (cf. Newing et al. 2011).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The story of Nyai Ageng Bakaran: the beginning of the prohibition of selling of cooked rice

The discussion of the consumption of the cooked rice, the local wisdom, and the general culture of the Bakaran people cannot be separated from the past story of the Bakaran Village founder, popularly known as *Nyai Ageng Bakaran*.

Historically, *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* was one of the members of Majapahit Kingdom. She was responsible for providing food for the members of the kingdom. Before the

collapse of Majapahit and infiltration, Islamization was done by the Sultanate of Demak. Consequently, many members of the Majapahit, who were not yet Islamized, decided to leave the kingdom. This is also because the King of Majapahit chose to leave his kingdom. During the escape, the community believed that the life of *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* was full of concerns and limitations. One of the informants mentioned as follows: "*sawijining dina, nate Nyai Ageng punika sampun pirang-pirang dinten mboten dhahar Mas. Lajeng ngoten Nyai ningali tebih punika wonten warung ingkang rame sanget. Nyai ingkang sampun putus asa kedah pripon ngewanikaken kangge nyedak ugi nyuwun sabungkus sekul amargi Nyai ugi rombonganipun sampun kaluwen. Ananging ingkang gadhah warung malah ngusir Nyai amargi dipun anggep ngeganggu tiyang ingkang tumbas maeman.*" (Basir 2016, press com).

It can be translated as follows: "I inform you Brother (Mas) that once, *Nyai Ageng* had not consumed the cooked rice for several days. Then, *Nyai Ageng* looked at a very crowded small food shop (*warung makan*), present at a distance. Desperate and starved, *Nyai Ageng* and her group got closer to the shop and asked for a pack of the cooked rice. However, instead of giving them cooked rice, the small shop owner expelled them, considering that they are disturbing consumers who wanted to buy food from the small shop" (Basir 2016, press com).

This story is recognized as the background of the prohibition (*pantangan*) to sell cooked rice in the Bakaran community. The limitation, the concern, and the unpleasant treatment caused *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* to provide a message to each member of her entourage to appreciate and preserve every food that was owned, particularly the cooked rice, as the staple food.

### Practice and meaning of the symbolic *pantangan* to sell the cooked rice

The origin of the prohibition (*pantangan*) to sell the cooked rice was the bad life experience of *Nyai Ageng* of Bakaran, as an escape from the Majapahit. In addition, she was unkindly treated by a seller of the small food shop when she asked for help to get the rice cooked. It caused the prohibition (*pantangan*) on selling cooked rice.

This prohibition (*pantangan*) has been obeyed by the community of Bakaran Village until now. They believe that if the prohibition is violated, it will bring disaster (*bendu*) for the person who broke—it. One of the informants mentions as follows: "*pantangan dodolan sega kuwi ora iso dilanggar mas. Bahaya tur iso kena ciloko nak ono sing wani ngelanggar pantangan kuwi. Iku tonggoku contone mas, biyen tau dodolan sego, awit dodolan nganti saiki loro-loronan terus ora mari-mari.*" (Basir 2016, press com).

It can be translated as: "Brother (Mas), I inform you that the prohibition on selling the cooked rice cannot be violated. It is dangerous and can be wretched if anyone dares to break the *pantangan* (taboo). For example, my neighbor in the past had sold the rice cooked. Consequently, she fell ill and has not been cured until now" (Basir 2016, press com).



Today, the community of Bakaran Village believes that cooked rice is the main staple food that each person needs. This story has been transmitted the concern of the *Nyai Ageng Bakaran*, resulting in the community believing that it must not be sold for personal benefit. Instead of selling, it may be given to other people who need it.

For the community of Bakaran Village, giving and sharing the cooked rice has several meanings. Firstly, the prohibition (*pantangan*) creates a value for each Bakaran community member to share, help, and keep each other. The importance of sharing is intended not only for physical sharing but also for sharing anxiety, happiness, and other feelings. The cooked rice is only symbolic in creating this important sense. When each community person can share others' feelings, they will help each other or among groups. As a result, the community will develop a mutual understanding when each community member can share feelings and help others. Finally, mutual care for each other is created.

Secondly, the prohibition symbolizes that each person should not only benefit himself or become rich. The message given by *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* is that material richness alone does not guarantee one's prosperity. If all community members, such as relatives, neighbors, and the general public, are saved from starving, that is a form of prosperity for Bakaran Village. Each Thursday, the community of Bakaran usually visits the sacred grave (*punden*, *makam*, or *petilasan*) of *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* to get blessings (*ngalab berkah*) or pay respect to *Nyai Ageng*. Many people will bring the cooked rice to the *punden* as a form of gratitude and distribute it to persons who conduct pilgrimage (Figure 4.A-4. B). In addition, each Thursday, the guardian of the grave (on behalf of *Nyai Ageng Bakaran*) also distribute the food (a parcel of the cooked rice, cassava, or other staple foods) as a form of sharing so that the people do not starve (Figure 4. C).

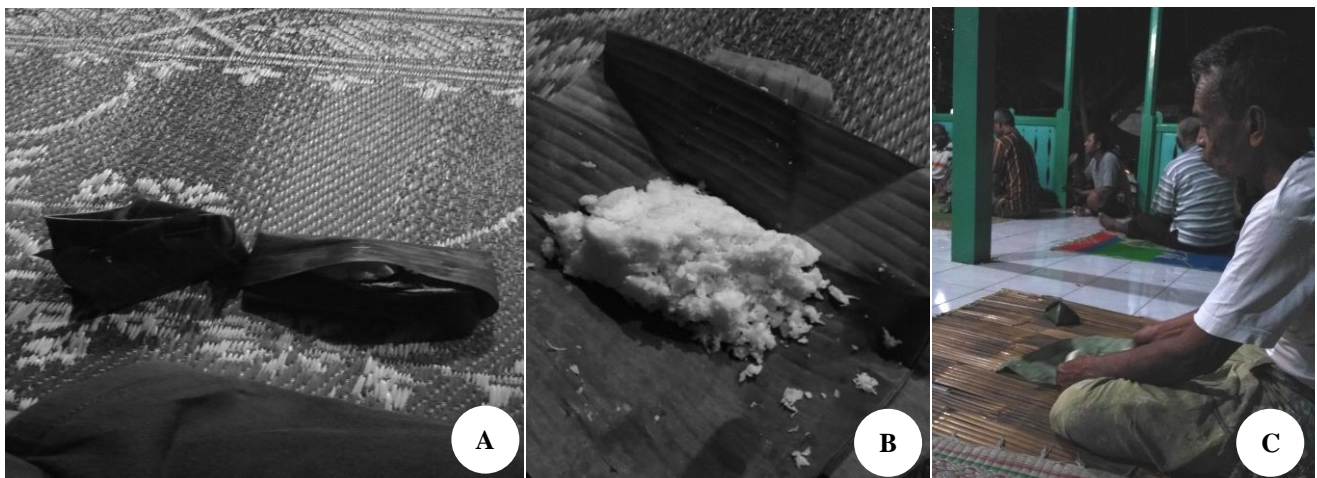
### The functions of the prohibition (*Pantangan*) of selling the cooked rice

Though the prohibition on selling cooked rice is not changed (*ajeg*), in reality, the local wisdom is always negotiated according to the community's needs. For example, in the past, the community of Bakaran was not allowed to sell the hulled rice (*beras*) at all. Today, however, they are not allowed to sell only the cooked rice, but selling the hulled rice or other forms, such as the rice cake (*lontong*), is permitted.

Firstly, the prohibition on the selling of cooked rice has caused regarding rice as a sacred food; as a result, its utilization should not be for arbitrary purposes, such as for selling. The food, particularly the cooked rice, must be only consumed to fulfill the human need. This prohibition on the sale of cooked rice can finally realize the food security of the community of Bakaran through the local wisdom they believed. One of the old men mentioned as follows: "*wong Bakaran iku awit biyen nganti saiki orak pernah krungu ono sing kurang mangan mas. Wong bakaran iku apik-apik, nak weruh tonggone ora duwe lawoh yo diweki lawoh, ora duwe sega yo diwenehi sega. Dadi mboh duwe duit opo ora, wong Bakaran iku mesti iso mangan.*" (Cempluk, 2016, pers. com.)

It can be translated as follows: "Brother, I inform you that the Bakaran people from the past until now have never heard about getting starved. The Bakarans are always good; if someone sees his neighbor does not have the fish, they will give fish. In addition, if someone does not have the cooked rice, they will be given the cooked rice. Therefore, whether they have money or not, the Bakaran people can always eat the cooked rice" (Cempluk 2016, pers. com.)

This function is in harmony with law No.41 2009, which defines food security as a condition of fulfilling both in quality and quantity of safe, evenly distributed, and affordable (Dewan Ketahanan Pangan, 2010).



**Figure 5.** A-B. Serving food at the *punden* or the sacred grave of the *Nyai Ageng Bakaran* Village. C. The people of Bakaran Village eating together at the holy tomb of *Nyi Ageng Bakaran*

The second function is the socialization of the prohibition (*pantangan*) to sell the cooked rice always begins with the story of *Nyai Ageng* of Bakaran, which is a way the community rememorizes the story of the past, and is aimed at establishing identity awareness. Since the memory itself can be distributed by contexts of the story, the community will fully understand the cultural values and later on can support the identity and stop the values that do not help the neighborhood's identity (Rodriguez 2007).

The local wisdom of the prohibition (*pantangan*) of selling cooked rice is, finally, the distinctive culture of Bakaran Village's community. This identity can strengthen when associated with other groups with different cultures. This is because the culture itself is created, maintained, and transformed through interaction and relationships among them, which is defined as "we" and another, which is defined as "them" (Barth 1988).

To sum up, the local wisdom on the prohibition of selling rice is not steady from the past until now. Each generation's local wisdom is negotiated and interpreted differently based on the community's needs. The story is passed down intergenerational; the cooked rice has become one of the staple foods that is interpreted as sacred, must be kept, and is not for one's benefit. This local wisdom has a profound meaning for the owner of the culture, the Bakaran community, Pati, Central Java, to maintain the food security for their survival and as the cultural community binder. In conclusion, the local wisdom of the Bakaran community is related to sacred, taboo or prohibition, or mystical and essential for cultural adaptation with their environment.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Johan Iskandar, who always supported this study at the Padjadjaran University and provided suggestions while writing this article. We would also like to thank our colleagues for Their support

## REFERENCES

Albuquerque UP, Cunha LVFC, Lucena RFP, Alves RRN. 2014. Methods and techniques in ethnobiology and ethnoecology. Springer, New York. DOI: 10.1007/978-1-4614-8636-7.

- Albuquerque UP, Alves RRN. (eds). 2016. Introduction to ethnobiology. Springer, New York. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-28155-1.
- Anderson B. 2008. Imagined communities. Insist Press and Pustaka Pelajar, Yogyakarta. [Indonesian]
- Anderson EN. 2011. Ethnobiology: an overview of a growing field. In: Anderson et al. (eds.) Ethnobiology. Wiley-Blackwell, New York. DOI: 10.1002/9781118015872.
- Apomfires F. 2002. Food of the traditional community of Jae: a cursory note in the nutrition research. J Antropologi Papua 1 (2): 1-16 [Indonesian].
- Barth F. 1988. Ethnic Group and the Limitation of the Social Order of Cultural Differences. UI Press, Jakarta.
- Budiyanto MAK. 2010. Model of the food security development based on the banana through revitalization of local wisdom value. J Teknik Industri 11 (2): 170-177. [Indonesian]
- De Jong W. 2007. Rice rituals, Kinship identities, and ethnicity in Central Flores. In Janowski M, Kerlogue F. (eds). Kinship and food in South East Asia. NIAS Press, Denmark.
- Dewan Ketahanan Pangan. 2010. The general policy of the food security 2010-2014. Dewan Ketahanan Pangan, Jakarta. [Indonesian]
- Ellen RF. 2006. Ethnobiology and the science of humankind. Wiley-Backwell, London.
- Geertz C. 2016. The cultural interpretation. PT. Kanisius, Yogyakarta. [Indonesian]
- Iskandar J. 2012. Ethnobiology and sustainable development. PPKPK-AIPI, Bandung [Indonesian].
- Iskandar J. 2016. Ethnobiology and cultural diversity in Indonesia. Jurnal Umbara 1 (1): 27-42. [Indonesian]. DOI: 10.24198/umbara.v1i1.9602.
- Kanowski M. 2007. Introduction: feeding the right food: the flow of life and the construction of Kinship in Southeast Asia. In: Janowski M, Kerlogue F (eds). Kinship and Food in South East Asia. NIAS Press, Denmark.
- Koentjaraningrat 1991. Research methods of the community. Gramedia Pustaka Utama, Jakarta. [Indonesian]
- Maida CA. 2011. Sustainability and Communities of Place. Berghahn Books, New York.
- Miles MB, Huberman AM. 1992. Data analysis of qualitative: a sourcebook on new methods. UI Press, Jakarta.
- Milton K. 1996. Environmentalism and cultural theory: exploring the role anthropology in environmental discourse. Routledge, London.
- Minnis PE. 2000. Introduction. In Minnis PE. (ed), Ethnobotany: A reader. The University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, USA.
- Newing H, Eagle CM, Puri R, Watson CW. 2011. Conducting research in conservation: social science methods and practice. Routledge, London. DOI: 10.4324/9780203846452.
- Rodriguez J, Fortier T. 2007. Cultural memory resistance, faith, and identity. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Spradley JP. 2007. Method of Ethnography. Tiara Wacana, Yogyakarta [Indonesian].
- Suyastiri NM. 2008. Diversification of the staple food consumption based on local potential in realizing the village household of the Semin Sub-district, Gunung Kidul District. J Ekonomi Pembangunan 13 (1): 51-60.
- Wichart G. 2004. Minahasa identity: a culinary practice. J Antropologi Indonesia 28 (74): 59-80. [Indonesian]