

# Rethinking the Concept of Disability from the Perspective of Javanese Local Culture

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## Keywords: Abstract

disability; javanese culture; orang sakti; local wisdom

Javanese culture provides a unique epistemological framework for understanding disability. Within Javanese cosmology, disability is not limited to bodily impairment but is embedded in symbolic, ritual, and religious structures, as reflected in figures such as Palawijan and the Punakawan. This study aims to clarify, reinterpret, and reclaim the place of disability within Javanese thought. Colonial modernity introduced epistemic ruptures, establishing hierarchical knowledge systems and medical frameworks that defined disability as illness or abnormality. Such models severed disability from its spiritual and cosmological dimensions and privileged utilitarian, medical interpretations. Employing cultural hermeneutics, supported by theories of \*othering\* and orientalism, this research examines how colonial knowledge marginalized indigenous meanings. The findings show that disability in Javanese culture is closely associated with spiritual potency and moral agency. Persons with disability are often regarded as \*orang sakti\*, individuals with supernatural power who mediate justice, balance, and welfare. Disability is a source of sacred power essential for maintaining cosmological harmony and communal well-being.

## Kata Kunci: Abstrak

disabilitas; budaya jawa; orang sakti; kearifan lokal

*Budaya Jawa menyediakan kerangka epistemologis yang unik untuk memahami disabilitas. Dalam kosmologi Jawa, disabilitas tidak terbatas pada gangguan tubuh semata, tetapi tertanam dalam struktur simbolik, ritual, dan religius, sebagaimana tercermin dalam figur seperti Palawijan dan Punakawan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperjelas, menafsirkan kembali, dan merebut kembali posisi disabilitas dalam pemikiran Jawa. Modernitas kolonial memperkenalkan keterputusan epistemik dengan membangun sistem pengetahuan yang hierarkis serta kerangka medis yang mendefinisikan disabilitas sebagai penyakit atau abnormalitas yang memerlukan rehabilitasi. Model-model tersebut memutus disabilitas dari dimensi spiritual dan kosmologisnya, serta mengutamakan tafsir yang utilitarian dan medis. Dengan menggunakan hermeneutika budaya, yang didukung teori \*othering\* dan orientalisme, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana pengetahuan kolonial memarginalkan makna-makna lokal. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa disabilitas dalam budaya Jawa sangat berkaitan dengan potensi spiritual dan agensi moral. Penyandang disabilitas kerap dipandang sebagai \*orang sakti\*, yakni individu yang memiliki kekuatan supranatural dan berperan sebagai penengah keadilan, keseimbangan, serta kesejahteraan. Disabilitas adalah sumber kekuatan sakral yang penting untuk menjaga harmoni kosmologis dan kesejahteraan komunitas.*

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## A. Introduction

Disability is a dynamic concept. The preamble of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) paragraph (e) clearly states that disability is an evolving concept. It will "grow" according to changes in understanding and the existing socio-cultural context. *"Disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others"*(United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). In the context of Indonesia, the word "disability" has also undergone a long transformation. It started from the term "bercacat" (defective) in Law No. 33 of 1947 to "people with disabilities," as recorded in Law No. 8 of 2016 (Widinarsih, 2019). Just as language in communication evolves with the times, so too does it. Language that is popular today may not necessarily be understood or accepted in the future. CBM (Christian Blind Mission), a nonprofit organization dedicated to disability empowerment, notes that a term for disability accepted in one country may not be suitable in another (CBM, 2017, p. 24).

There is no single, agreed-upon definition of disability in disability studies. However, proponents of the social model, particularly Oliver (McLean & Williamson, 2007, pp. 21–26; Oliver, 1996, pp. 30–42; Rapley, 2004, pp. 63–67; Schipper, 2006, pp. 17–20), offer a definition that emphasizes the social aspects of disability. They agree that people with disabilities experience stigmatization and marginalization, at least in the Western world. Disability is a social construct (Olyan, 2008, p. 2; Rapley, 2004, p. 63; Schipper, 2006, p. 20), and at the same time a cultural construct, acquiring an identity as sinful (a framework of sin and punishment) (Lewis, 2007, p. 61; Soles, 2018). It is not natural (natural and timeless). Disability is a cultural construct that has significantly contributed to the creation and perpetuation of social inequality (Olyan, 2008, p. 2).

Local cultural perspectives on disability differ significantly from the dominant theoretical models, such as the medical model (McLean & Williamson, 2007, pp. 12–21; Raphael, 2008, pp. 6–7; Reynolds, 2008, pp. 28–29) and the social model (McLean & Williamson, 2007, pp. 21–35; Oliver, 1983, 1996; Rapley, 2004, pp. 62–69; Reynolds, 2008, pp. 29–30). A cultural approach does not attempt to define disability in a fixed or universal manner; instead, it focuses on how concepts of disability and non-disability operate within specific cultural settings (Siri, 2020, p. 20).

In the ancient world, where scientific knowledge of disease and impairment was limited, illness was often associated with sin, and mental disorders were interpreted as demonic possession (Meaden, 2020, p. 10; Olyan, 2008, p. 70). Culturally, both Roman and Greek societies regarded disabled bodies as non-ideal forms (Parsons, 2011, p. 25). In contrast, ancient Egypt frequently represented disability – most notably dwarfism – through mythological figures, exposing these bodies as objects of entertainment and public spectacle (Pritchard & Kruse, 2020).

In contrast to ancient cultures of the Far East, Western societies are characterized by a deeply rooted individualism that places strong emphasis on personal autonomy. "Individualism is an isolating belief system. Each person is visualized as a microcosm, a particular instance or personification of "humanity", a self both like and unlike all other selves... social relationships arise not from any corporate solidarity but from the consent of autonomous individuals" (Augsburger, 1986, p. 85), and the body is conceived in predominantly material terms. Consequently, Western cultures tend to locate disability within socially constructed categories shaped by labour relations and produced by an exploitative capitalist economic structure (Russell, 2019, p. 16). For this reason, the term "the disabled" is preferred over "persons with disabilities." The term "disabled" functions as a classificatory label for those deemed unemployable within the means of production (Russell, 2019, p. 28). Ultimately, disability becomes equated with commodities and rehabilitation services (Oliver, 1996, p. 127), transforming it into a marketable product that sustains the disability business and the rehabilitation industry (Albrecht, 1992, p. 14). The effects of this capitalist treatment of disability can be observed globally, including in Indonesia, where workers with bodily impairments are stigmatized and marginalized from the category of "productive" labour.

How, then, is disability understood within Javanese society? Significantly, there is no single lexical term in Javanese culture that directly corresponds to *disability* (Pro, 2024) as defined by the World Health Organization or by Indonesian Law No. 8 of 2016. There is no overarching expression equivalent to the WHO “Global Disability Action Plan 2014–2021,” which conceptualizes disability as “an umbrella term for impairments” (WHO, 2015). Instead, different forms of bodily limitation are named in particular and contextual ways. For instance, weaknesses in speech may be referred to as *groyok*, *pelo*, or *cedhal* (Javanese) – terms indicating stuttering or unclear articulation. Hearing impairments may be designated as *budheg*, *njepiping*, *perung*, or *dawir* (Javanese). Although these conditions are generally categorized as *bisu* and *tuli* (mute and deaf), such Indonesian terms do not adequately represent the semantic range of Javanese expressions, each of which carries distinct meanings depending on its syntactic usage. For example, *kupinge budheg* denotes an inability to hear, whereas *kupinge dawir* describes ears that appear merely attached to the head, almost detached and dysfunctional. Javanese society understands disability as culturally rooted in symbolic system (Geertz, 2000), saturated with ancient mythologies and narrative traditions manifest in popular imagery (Storey, 1993), such as stories of *palawija*, the dwarf soldiers of Yogyakarta, or the *Punakawan* in wayang narratives. Disability is believed to be intertwined with spiritual power, social interaction, and holistic well-being (Javanese = *kamukten*) (Keeler, 1987, p. 44). Disability, in this horizon, denotes *orang sakti* – persons endowed with supernatural potency (Thohari, 2012, p. 2; Thohari et al., 2017, p. 3).

A particularly compelling phenomenon emerges in the Javanese context: disability, which originally carried symbolic, philosophical, and religious meanings, has been displaced by the forces of modernity. Disability undergoes a process of *othering* (Amalia, 2020), becoming the *liyan* – the outsider – because it has been uprooted from its cultural foundations and communal relations (Harisantoso et al., 2025). Under the rhetoric of empowerment and independence, people with disabilities are increasingly “relocated” to institutions that are physically and socially distant from family, church, and society. This pattern reflects what Mitchell describes as institutionalization: “*Segregation and Seclusion: Neither Seen nor Heard*” (B. W. Mitchell, 2010, pp. 18–19).

A significant shift has occurred in understandings, attitudes, and practices concerning disability, most notably the transition from a medical to a social model (Santoso & Apsari, 2017). Model-based approaches rationalize spiritual and religious interpretations in terms of materialist and capitalist ones. Disability becomes marginalized as an unproductive entity, unable to compete with the healthy or *abled* body, similar to employees in a competitive corporate system (Mik-Meyer, 2016). With the arrival of European powers, when the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) sent physicians into its colonies, including Java, the body was systematically administered by professional medical authorities. The Javanese concept of health, which had explained the origins of disease, disability, and healing strategies through mysticism, miracle, and gnosis (Woodward, 1985) was gradually reduced. Thohari observes that the rationalization of the Western medical model transformed disability from being understood as *orang sakti* into being perceived as *orang sakit*. “Wounds and bodily anomalies, once closely linked with Semar, Petruk, or the Creator of Heaven, now correspond to the physician's ability to set bones, describe blood circulation, or identify viruses and bacteria within the body. The body is no longer sacred, but a sick body” (Thohari, 2012, p. 6; Thohari et al., 2017, p. 4). Figures such as *dwafis*, *cebolan*, or *palawija* are increasingly interpreted not as bearers of cosmological meaning, but merely as cases of stunting and unmet health needs (Triratnawati & Arista, 2019).

The author observes that this shift in perspective increasingly consigns disability to a state of estrangement. Rather than defending the rights of people with disabilities and embracing them as an integral part of Javanese communal life, contemporary practices tend instead to exclude and marginalize them (Volf, 2019). Instead of positioning disability within the horizon of “us,” the distance between “I” and “you” is widened, producing a discourse of “those people with disabilities” or “them” versus “us,” and eroding the language of “we-ness” and shared belonging (B. W. Mitchell, 2010, p. 23).

This, therefore, underscores the imperative of a systematic and foundational inquiry – one that seeks to recover the philosophical and religious values within cultural understandings of disability.

Viewing and reinterpreting disability through the lens of local Javanese culture becomes crucial. Disability for Javanese people is not only about the body, material things, but also philosophical and religious cultural values. Such an approach enables the exploration of issues surrounding disability not only in terms of material and social dimensions, but also in cultural imagery (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 49). This cultural perspective – often referred to as a "cultural model" – prioritizes the methods and insights of the social sciences and humanities (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 5). Its scope is broader than that of the medical model, which focuses primarily on individual impairment, or the social model, which construes disability solely as a failure of society. Javanese cultural frameworks help reveal disability as a form of human variation that is confronted by environmental barriers and socially mediated differences, which generate group identity and phenomenological perspectives (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 10). In other words, for the cultural model, disability is not merely the outcome of social organization – a societal failure – but is an integral, constitutive element of social organization itself (Schipper, 2006, p. 20).

## B. Research Methods

Model theory posits that perceptions, attitudes, and practices toward disability have varied across historical periods. For instance, disability in ancient Roman and Greek civilizations (Parsons, 2011) was evaluated through the ideal of the perfect body. Attitudes toward disability in the Hebrew Bible differ between priestly regulations (Olyan, 2008) and David's treatment of Mephibosheth (Schipper, 2006). Views and attitudes toward disability in the West (Russell, 2019) likewise differ from those in Indonesia, particularly Java (Thohari, 2012). These variations affirm Geertz's observation that human beings – including persons with disabilities – are creatures suspended in webs of meaning they themselves have spun. These webs of meaning constitute culture, and understanding them requires cultural interpretation (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, p. 5).

A cultural-interpretive approach enables the researcher to examine the symbolic meanings, representations, and social expressions associated with disability within the Javanese cultural context. Cultural interpretation provides a framework for unveiling both "thin description" (surface phenomena) and "thick description" (the deep symbolic meanings beneath them). Cultural interpretation examines the values, concepts, and ideas that shape behavior, and investigates how communities attribute meaning to their experiences and surroundings. Distinctively, this approach seeks out expressive forms of behaviour that reflect the deeper foundations of meaning embedded in everyday life (Mulder, 1980, p. xiv).

Given that disability in Java has undergone a prolonged process of othering for centuries—beginning with the arrival of Western powers – Edward Said's critique in *Orientalism* becomes a compelling theoretical lens for interrogating Western hegemonic power over the East (Said, 2010). Western formulations of disability tend to impose their conceptual frameworks in interpreting and evaluating disability experiences within Eastern cultures. The global culture of "disability" is often construed as a modern phenomenon and, as such, is perceived as inherently good and enlightening, and thus something to be embraced (Featherstone, 1993, p. 171). In practice, however, the definition of disability articulated by the WHO and subsequently adopted by states that ratified its conventions, including Indonesia (UU RI No 19 Tahun 2011 Tentang Pengesahan Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (Konvensi Mengenai Hak-Hak Penyandang Disabilitas) constitutes an inseparable mechanism that generalises disability as limited to matters of "impairment," "deficiency," and "restriction".

This study employs a library research approach that centers on a critical dialogue with books, archival materials, news documents related to disability within Javanese experiences, scholarly articles, film and photographic documentation, correspondence, and other relevant sources (Simanjuntak & Sosrodihardjo, 2009, p. 8). These materials constitute the primary data of the study,

while secondary data consist of supporting literature relevant to the research topic. As a descriptive study, this research pays particular attention to social issues emerging within society, prevailing cultural practices, specific social situations, patterns of relationships and activities, attitudes, perspectives, ongoing social processes, and the broader influences generated by particular phenomena (Nazir, 1985, pp. 63–64). The selection of data sources was determined by academic credibility, thematic relevance, and their contribution to the development of the study's analytical framework. The analytical procedure was conducted critically and systematically through several stages: collecting relevant literature, undertaking critical reading, identifying key ideas, constructing comparative analyses of various perspectives, and developing critical interpretations grounded in social and cultural studies. To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the research, the study employed comparative examination of relevant literature, relied on credible academic references, and maintained rigorous control over the application of theoretical frameworks within an academic context.

## C. Results and Discussion

### Disability Studies and Local Culture

Ways of thinking about disability shape attitudes toward it and influence the self-understanding of persons with disabilities themselves. Within a materialist society, disability is viewed as a product of capitalism. Disability is no different from the production of cars or hamburgers. Each has its own industry, whether automobiles, fast food, or human services. Every industry employs a workforce with vested interests in producing its goods in particular ways and attempts to control the production process tightly. Disability becomes commercialized and transformed into a "commodity" – the central product of the "disability business" – accompanied by a range of techniques for its management, treatment, and rehabilitation (Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, 127; Rapley 63). This corresponds with a materialist worldview, in which disability is viewed as a social construct (Rapley, 2004, p. 63). In the broader sphere of care, Albrecht observes that disability has become inseparable from the goods and services of rehabilitation. Disability has become a commodity that undergirds the disability business and the rehabilitation industry (Albrecht, 1992, p. 14). Albrecht further explains that disability and its care were initially domestic matters, yet eventually underwent industrialization and entered the factory system. Rehabilitation became an institutional norm. The consequences for consumers are significant: as rehabilitation goods and services are commodified, the focus of rehabilitation shifts from care to cure, and the locus of care moves from private homes to hospitals that function increasingly like factories (Albrecht, 1992, p. 290).

Paula Sotnik and Mary Ann Jezewski, in *Culture and the Disability Services*, emphasize that within the United States, what counts as disability must comply with existing legislation, particularly the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of an individual. What is considered a disability in the United States often varies widely across government agencies, public and private institutions, and consumer groups. Thus, definitions and meanings of disability are shaped by diverse perceptions held by individuals, communities, and institutions (Sotnik & Jezewski, 2005, p. 25). European–American values concerning equality and individual capability, as sources of social identity, inform disability concepts that may not apply to other cultural groups (Sotnik & Jezewski, 2005, p. 26). Therefore, understandings of disability and the issues surrounding it in the United States may differ from those in other parts of the world. For example, traditional Korean communities believe that disability is caused by supernatural forces, such as divine punishment or demonic curses for the sins of the individual, their parents, or even their ancestors (Kim-Rupnow, 2005, p. 119). This stands in contrast to professional groups in Korea, who incorporate environmental factors in their explanations, in line with the framework articulated by the WHO (Kim-Rupnow, 2005, p. 120).

Traditional Korean cultural attitudes bear a notable resemblance to those of Southeast Asia, where disability is often attributed to parental behavior – particularly that of the mother during

pregnancy – or to sins committed by members of the family (Sotnik & Jezewski, 2005, p. 27). Javanese communities share this conviction, understanding the origins of disability as shaped by actions and conduct that violate cultural norms. However, they also possess distinctive cultural beliefs concerning disability. This worldview parallels, although it is not identical to, the beliefs found in Jamaica. The key difference lies in how Jamaican interpretations of disability are shaped by Christian religion and Afro-Christian sects such as Pocomania and Kumina. Disability is often perceived as a form of divine punishment for wrongdoing. Other explanations include the influence of malevolent spirits, such as duppies, obeah, or guzu (Miller, 2005, p. 95). Given the assumption that disability is the consequence of past transgressions, the condition generates shame and guilt within the family. To avoid public humiliation, families frequently conceal the presence of disability among their members (Miller, 2005, p. 96).

Reflecting on this reality, Deborah Beth Creamer describes disability as an "open minority," arguing that disability is a common human experience. At some point in life, virtually everyone will face some form of "incapacity" as they age (Creamer, 2009, p. 18). In other words, with advancing age, individuals inevitably encounter limitations, decline, or diminished mobility. For this reason, Creamer advises against constructing an oppositional distinction between disability and non-disability. As she observes, "It has been suggested that it makes little sense to try to distinguish between able and disabled, but rather that any difference is simply between disabled and temporarily able-bodied" (Creamer, 2009, p. 3). From this perspective, the term *disability* is essentially neutral, unlike descriptors such as *handicapped* (passé), *crippled* (derogatory), or *invalid* (patently offensive), all of which carry negative connotations (Raphael, 2008, p. 5). Within the social model, Oliver argues that disability is profoundly shaped by the values underlying how disability is "produced." Societies whose thinking is grounded in religious worldviews define disability differently from those whose understanding is based on science or medicine (Oliver, 1990, p. 22). Oliver further notes that, within specific cultural contexts, a person with polio may be regarded as the victim of sorcery. At the same time, an individual with epilepsy may be perceived as being possessed by an evil spirit.

In this regard, the author finds affinity with Wendy Lawson and John Swinton, who maintain that disability constitutes a form of "human diversity." Lawson reflects particularly on autism, which is often labeled as abnormal. She challenges dominant assumptions about "normality" (i.e., disability) by offering an illustrative example drawn from the animated film *Happy Feet* (Lawson, 2008, pp. 27–30). From the perspective of Christian disability spirituality, John Swinton argues in *Becoming Friends of Time* that disability cannot be understood in terms of abnormality or tragedy. Rather, within God's time, disability plays a crucial role in revealing the beauty of human diversity and opens new channels for receiving divine revelation (Swinton, 2016, p. 87).

### The Importance of Understanding Disability within Javanese Culture

The symposium titled *Local Concepts and Beliefs about Disability in Different Cultures*, held on 21–24 May 1998 at the Gustav-Stresemann Institut e.V., and later published in the volume *Disability in Different Cultures*, edited by Brigitte Holzer, Arthur Vreede, and Gabriele Weigt, provides significant insights into how disability is understood within local cultural contexts (Holzer et al., 1999a). First, disability is shown to be produced by those who hold particular assumptions about disability as a marker of human differentiation. The arrival of the VOC marked a pivotal point in the introduction of Western frameworks, which enabled the production and imposition of Western notions of disability in Java. This shift is evident in contemporary perspectives on disability, in which persons with disabilities are no longer associated with spiritual beings possessing magical capacities; instead, they are reduced to bodies that are ill. Disability is thus no longer linked to spiritual power or mystical potency, but instead to medical and health sciences (Thohari, 2012, p. 6). Snyder and Mitchell trace the roots of such assumptions to the eugenics era, when disability was regarded as an undesirable inversion – or deviation – from what was considered everyday life. As Loughnane notes, "*The norm, by devaluing everything that the reference to it prohibits from being considered normal, creates on its own the possibility of an inversion of terms*" (Loughnane, 2019, p. 8). This cultural rhetoric has generated

responses and treatments that ultimately impede the ability of persons with disabilities to participate fully in shaping their own cultural expressions (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006, p. 3).

At its height, eugenics actively reinforced the supremacy of normalcy while simultaneously advancing political efforts to negate the very existence of persons with disabilities. Consequently, the local cultural approach – what Snyder refers to as the *cultural model* – seeks to distance disability from dominant definitions that characterize persons with disabilities primarily in terms of incapacity and dysfunction. The local cultural model is considered more comprehensive than the social model, which tends to portray disability merely as the outcome of discriminatory treatment. The formulation of the cultural model makes possible, at least theoretically, political actions aimed at redefining disability as a form of resistance, and, through cultural resources, rearticulating perspectives that have been materially and linguistically damaged.

*Second*, every culture possesses its own distinct references and even unusual ambiguities. Clifford Geertz describes culture as a symbolic system, “a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz, 2000, p. 80). Manusia adalah *homo simbolicus*, pembuat makna (Ghai, 2015, p. 21). The question, then, is whether disability communicates particular meanings embodied in symbols of impairment, or whether it is an *sich*, as asserted by medical and social models. Within the framework of disability studies, the writer views Geertz’s thought as providing a pathway for Snyder and Mitchell in articulating disability as a cultural fabrication (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2011, p. 15). In their analysis, they attempt to liberate disability from the cultural constructions that imprison it. They outline practical steps to free disability from identity constructions and the negative stigma (Goffman, 1963) that accompanies it by attending to issues such as negative imagery, social realism, new historicism, biographical criticism, and the political dimensions embedded within disability discourse (D. T. Mitchell & Snyder, 2011, pp. 15–45).

From this perspective, one can discern the symbolic meanings embedded in the figures of the *Punakawan* and *Palawijan* within Javanese society’s understanding of disability. Borrowing Martin Buber’s terminology, the importance of disability studies within local cultural perspectives lies in situating disability within its proper relational context – namely, a whole and dignifying relationship that honors human existence, the I-Thou relation (Buber, 1937). More specifically, the author argues that such a study will place disability within its complete human existence, inseparable from the lives of others. Disability is embedded in relationality – what may be understood as trinitarian relations (Harisantoso, 2024). The relational understanding of disability that reflects the equality and interconnectedness of the Trinity.

In practical terms, whether in church ministry or within the broader community, understanding disability within its local cultural context becomes essential for avoiding conceptual misunderstandings and misguided forms of service. It is not uncommon for NGOs working in humanitarian fields – particularly those addressing disability issues – to experience failure, rejection, or even abandonment by their target communities because beneficiaries ascribe meanings to disability that differ markedly from those assumed by program designers (Holzer et al., 1999b, p. 10). Holzer further illustrates this with the case of landmine survivors in Cambodia who were provided with prosthetic limbs. Many recipients returned to begging along the roadside and removed their prostheses. When asked why they did not use them, one replied, “Your prosthesis cannot feed me.” This example demonstrates that a comprehensive understanding of local traditions, cultural practices, and anthropological realities is crucial for developing effective disability service models. Harisantoso’s findings within the context of the GKJW likewise underscore the importance of attending to local cultural contexts in formulating effective disability ministry (Harisantoso et al., 2025).

### Reinterpreting Disability within Javanese Local Culture

In Javanese cosmology, human existence is believed to be intricately connected to the universe. Suwardi Endraswara emphasizes that Javanese life is profoundly shaped by the expression *dalane*

*waskitha saka niteni*, which conveys the idea that what unfolds tomorrow depends on careful and attentive observation today. In practical terms, this concept is expressed through *kiblat papat* – the four cardinal orientations – and a dualistic cosmic order consisting of upper and lower realms, fortunes and misfortunes (*begja-cilaka*), sorrow and joy (*susah-bungah*), and complementary forces such as father sky and mother earth (*bapa akasa-ibu pertiwi*). Consequently, within this cosmic worldview, the Javanese people understand life through the dictum "*urip iku mung saderma*," meaning that human destiny is ultimately determined by God (Endraswara, 2015, p. 110).

The binary belief inherent in *kiblat papat* represents both positive and negative elements. Amalia observes that the positive dimension is associated with nondisability, whereas disability corresponds to the negative pole. This dualism parallels the world of *pewayangan*, in which the Pandawa symbolize goodness while the Kurawa represent wrongdoing (Amalia). Nevertheless, within Javanese belief systems, elements categorized as negative do not always carry negative connotations. Certain phenomena may instead assume an anomalous or liminal character. This is precisely the case with disability in Javanese cultural thought. Wayang narratives portray the *punakawan* as figures marked by disability, yet they simultaneously embody "*roles as entertainers, advisers, and dialogical companions*" (Purwadi, 2010, p. 19).

#### Disability as Sacred Power (Orang Sakti)

Javanese society often regards persons with disabilities as possessing extraordinary powers (*orang sakti*) (Thohari et al., 2017, p. 3). Ward Keeler even notes that they are believed capable of defeating an opponent merely through the force of their flatulence (Keeler, 1987, p. 209). They are attributed with magical potency and accorded respect. Such conceptions of disability are deeply embedded within the cosmological belief systems of Javanese society and cannot be separated from the rhythms of daily life (Thohari, 2012, p. 2). A well-known example of this association between disability and sacred power is found in the *punakawan* of the wayang tradition and in the *palawija*, the mystical warrior figures of the Yogyakarta kingdom. The *punakawan*, characterized by disability, physical disproportionality, and unconventional appearance (Sunarto, 2012), occupy a vital role in wayang narratives. They serve as guardians and attendants to the Pandawa, offering counsel and wisdom in critical decision-making – exemplified in the tale "*Petruk Dadi Raja*" (Petruk Becomes King) (Thohari, 2012, pp. 3–4). Sindoepranoto depicts Semar as a *punakawan* figure who summons tranquility and guides others toward happiness (Sindoepranoto, 1915). Thus, it is not an exaggeration when Purwadi states that the *punakawan* symbolize the divine voice that accompanies the Pandawa (the *ksatria*), protects them, and serves as the moral compass to which they must remain accountable (Purwadi, 2014, p. 95).

Another narrative illustrating disability as sacred power is found in the *Palawijan*, figures commonly recognized as *cebolan* (dwarves). Medically, dwarfism is identified as skeletal dysplasia (Deiseroth et al., 2024; Pritchard, 2021, p. 1). Within Javanese culture, however, disability carries a deeply symbolic meaning. In the Keraton Ngayogyakarta Hadiningrat, persons with disabilities are referred to as *Palawija* (the *Punakawan* of the Yogyakarta court) (Pramulia, 2021). Lombard describes them as *abdi dalem* whose physical appearance is unconventional or "unsightly" (Lombard, 2005, p. 129). Within the *Grebeg* traditions – *Grebeg Mulud*, *Grebeg Syawal*, and *Grebeg Besar* – the *Palawija* play a ceremonial role by accompanying the procession of *gunungan*. The tallest *gunungan*, resembling a *lingga*, is regarded as male (*lanang*); the broad one is seen as female (*wadon*); and the smallest is believed to represent their children. The procession moves from the Kemandungan courtyard to Sitinggil and then proceeds outward to the northern square (*alun-alun utara*) (Lombard, 2005, pp. 128–129). It is important to note that the *grebeg* ceremony is an ancient ritual intended to restore the kingdom's well-being and cohesion. The *palawijan* – the dwarfish attendants – serve as symbols of the king's power, believed to possess spiritual potency that can overpower enemies. Thus, during times of war, they were seated beside the king or positioned in the front ranks while reciting protective prayers (Amalia, 2020).

From the foregoing discussion, the status of disability within Javanese society becomes clear. Disabilities—exemplified in figures such as the *punakawan* and *cebolan*—function as symbolic entities embedded within the cosmological framework of Javanese belief, carrying with them a rich reservoir of moral values. Sumukti, as cited in Thohari, describes disability as a guardian of balance and harmony in life, “*can help to change chaos to harmony*”. “*Semar is a symbol of the human mind, which provides wisdom; he is exactly where Arjuna is. Semar can be invisible but present in Arjuna’s mind in the form of all his past teachings. Semar, in difference from his analysis, is a symbol of the cosmos; he is the symbol of the earth as well, for he is identified with the gunung*” (Thohari, 2012, p. 4).

Epistemologically, a pronounced divergence exists in the modes of reasoning about disability between Western thought and Javanese society. Western conceptions of disability are strongly shaped by materialistic paradigms, in which disability is frequently construed in terms analogous to commodities or services—thus becoming depersonalized (Albrecht, 1992, p. 70). This stands in sharp contrast to Javanese understandings of disability (i.e., *palawijan* and *punakawan*). As Keeler observes, it is exceedingly difficult to find an equivalent concept within Western intellectual and cultural traditions, given that *palawijan* and *punakawan* are beloved figures regarded with familial closeness by the Javanese (Keeler, 1987, p. 108). They are understood as spiritual beings within the metaphysical universe of Javanese cosmology (Geertz, 1992: 51-58), and for this reason, the Javanese attribute to them inherent potency and magical power.

#### Javanese Disability: The Symbolism of the Punakawan

Etymologically, *punakawan* derives from two words: *puna* and *kawan*. *Puna* denotes hardship or difficulty, while *kawan* means companion, friend, or kin. Thus, *punakawan* may be rendered as “companions in times of distress” (Nugroho, 2020, p. iii). Correspondingly, their character embodies a range of roles, including spiritual advisors, guardians (*pamomong*), conversational partners, and sources of consolation in times of sorrow (Nugroho, 2020, p. 24). Just as a faithful companion offers support when a friend faces life’s adversities, the *punakawan* introduces humor – akin to the function of clowns – to provide comfort and moral strength, while simultaneously offering social critique and incisive commentary aimed at unveiling truth and cultivating wisdom (Rahmadi, 2015, p. 95). Another interpretation suggests that *punakawan* derives from *pana* and *kawan* (Solichin et al., 2019, p. 30). *Pana* may be translated as “illuminated” (Nugroho, 2020), or “clever,” thereby giving *panakawan* the meaning of companions or guides endowed with exceptional acumen, trustworthiness, broad insight, and sharp, discerning observation (Sunarto, 2012). In Javanese literary terminology, they embody *tanggap ing sasmita lan limpad pasang ing grahita* – the ability to grasp subtle signs and respond with clarity of intellect (Purwadi, 2014, p. 124).

The *punakawan* constitute a profound manifestation of Javanese symbolic richness. According to Geertz, these figures – Semar, Petruk, Gareng, and Bagong – appear as lowly jesters, servants, and loyal attendants to the Pandawa. However, paradoxically, the *punakawan* (Semar and his sons) are in fact deities in fully human form, siblings of Batara Guru, the king of the gods. As spiritual beings who guard all Javanese people from birth to the end of time, Semar may well be “the most important figure in the entire mythological corpus of wayang” (Geertz, 2014, p. 379). The *panakawan* embody the integration of *karsa*, *cipta*, *rasa*, and *karya* – the foundational dimensions of human creativity and cultural cultivation (Purwadi, 2014, p. 122). Seno Sastroamijoyo, in his work *Reflections on the Performance of Wayang Kulit* (Renungan Tentang Pertunjukan Wayang Kulit), cited in Purwadi, argues that the relationship between the *punakawan* and the Pandawa symbolizes, in many respects, the theological conception of *kawula* (humankind) and *Gusti* (the Divine) (Purwadi, 2014, pp. 122–123). The relational dynamic between the *punakawan* and the Pandawa thus reflects *manunggaling kawula-Gusti* – the mystical union between human beings and God.

Accordingly, Semar and other *punakawan* figures—who in many respects represent disability—are understood within Javanese cosmology as metaphysical beings. Their unattractive, even grotesque, physical forms do not diminish their sacred status; they must not be subjected to

ridicule. Any act of disparagement toward the *punakawan* (read: disability) is believed to invite catastrophic misfortune, as vividly illustrated in the story *Semar Kuning* (Purwadi, 2014, pp. 46–47).

#### D. Conclusion

In concluding this article, the author draws upon Geertz's insights concerning the interpretation of the "text of disability" embedded within Javanese culture as a woven system of symbols. Within a *thin description* framework, disability is construed merely as a physical expression or observable condition. From the author's perspective, thin description corresponds to a medicalized viewpoint in which disability is understood as illness – something to be cured or rehabilitated. In the social model, disability refers to individuals who lack access to and participation in essential resources due to social, cultural, or attitudinal barriers. Meanwhile, in the relational model, disability is conceived as the experience of bodily fragility or limitation that becomes exacerbated by isolation from one's social environment. Why is this the case? In reality, persons with disabilities remain confined within the ambivalent attitudes of both society and religious institutions and continue to be treated mainly as objects of charitable action.

Furthermore, *thick description* compels the reader to move beyond the visible aspects of disability and to discern the deeper meanings embedded within the symbols conveyed in Javanese culture. In the historical context of Yogyakarta and in wayang narratives, it is evident that *palawijan* and *punakawan* function as symbolic manifestations of anomaly. Within modern – indeed capitalist – thought, such figures would be regarded as impaired, bodily non-ideal, and economically unproductive. However, within the Javanese cosmological worldview, they are considered persons of great spiritual potency, even embodiments of supernatural power itself. Disability is thus understood as a sacred descent – what in Christian theology might be described as an "incarnation" – of divine presence that mediates communal well-being.

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