‘Usul mikul’, ‘Ketiban sampur’, and the atrophy of innovation process

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Abstract
Idea sharing is one of the most common ways of developing innovation in organizations. Aspirations and suggestions for improvements are recognized, discussed, and executed through idea sharing. This study adopts an ethnographic approach and critically analyzes how idea sharing goes against the grain of organizational culture. Based on a study of a higher education institution in Java, Indonesia, the paper highlights usul mikul and ketiban sampur as two modes of cultural practice which, over time, penalize innovators in their efforts to initiate change and renewal. The results show that these practices are formative to organizational atrophy. They weaken organizational capability to innovate due to the disuse of members’ capabilities. Importantly, the study contributes to the growing literature on innovation management, organizational culture, and higher education management.

Keywords: Critical analysis; atrophy; higher education; paradox; innovation management.

INTRODUCTION

From the late 19th century, there have been at least four ‘generations’ of innovation management: technology push, market pull, a combination of technology push and market pull, and networked innovation (van der Duin & Ortt, 2020). In each of these variants, emphases were placed on the outputs of innovation and the role of knowledge and intellectual capital on organizational resilience and success (Mention & Bontis, 2013; Schiuma, 2012; Wang et al., 2014). Several antecedents that support and inhibit innovation have been identified and tested (see, for example, Damanpour & Aravind, 2012; Mennens et al., 2018). Yet, coherent findings and insights remain elusive. Tidd (2001), for instance, argues that innovation management ‘best practice’ depends more heavily on contextual factors. Innovation management is not restricted only about
outputs but, more fundamentally, it relates to the processes and cultures within the organizations (Pisano, 2019; Valencia et al., 2010). Organizational culture contributes to innovation (Büschgens et al., 2013) and it is an intangible feature of an organization that has a major role in regulating how members interact through the production and reproduction of norms and values (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015).

Against the proliferation of studies in business institutions, this research takes a critical perspective and highlights two aspects of the gaps in the innovation management literature. First, there is a dearth of studies examining the phenomenon of dis-innovation from the organizational culture perspective. This is in line with Pisano (2019), which stated that some cultural practices that appear to contribute to innovation may be counterproductive. Second, this research examines the innovation process in a higher education institution in Java with a set of distinctive cultural configurations. From an innovation management perspective, this is a context that is little researched and theorized. This constitutes a theoretical gap, which is the aim and central contribution of this research.

Higher education is a unique context in this research because of its position as a pinnacle of formal education, a symbol of innovation, and the paradoxes it possesses (Blackmore & Sachs, 2000). For instance, there are many management experts in higher education institutions, but many of the decisions made by the management do not reflect the expertise that they possess (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). Second, higher education should always innovate to keep up with changes and yet it is restrained by fairly strict regulations (Anderson & McCune, 2013). Third, higher education is considered as a place of rationality and yet it is there also that rationalized myths can be found (Schriewer, 2009). Fourth, higher education in Indonesia is expected to fulfil every aspect of the tridharma (teaching, research, and community service), yet it is competing on scarce resources. Each of these components moves in opposite directions, putting managers of higher education institutions in a dilemma.

In many countries, including Indonesia, higher education has drawn much criticism. There are several highlights, such as the curriculum’s relevance to the work environment, high teaching hours, low scientific contributions, plagiarism of scientific papers, commercialization of education, and financial transparency (World Bank, 2012). Also, there is increasing competition due to the globalization of higher education and technology-based education (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Consequently, the national higher education is compelled to participate in the global arena. Pressures from industry, society, government, and the academic sector force higher education to innovate in providing education. Not all institutions can compete, and the inability of some higher education institutions in East Asia to set free from Western hegemony has led to a toxic academic culture (Yang, 2016).

Based on the conceptual and contextual challenges, this research examines the complexity of organizational culture as an intertwintement between the local culture, professional culture, and practices that seem counterproductive to innovation. In this study, these practices are referred to as ‘punitive culture’. From the sociology of law perspective, punitive culture is a specific set of practices through which a retributive penalty is performed (Valier, 2004). In other literature, punitive culture is defined as a set of norms held by an organization and is characterized by an unwillingness to take...
responsibility to avoid mistakes or punishment (Khatri et al., 2009). Kim et al. (2012) posit that, in a punitive culture, organization members tend to be silent and reluctant to propose innovative ideas to solve problems at hand or to avoid potential threats. The fear of punishment, they argue, encourages individuals to stay in their comfort zone and not to raise problems to other parties. This is detrimental to the organization because it impairs the ability to collect accurate and multi-perspective information to address a given problem. Consequently, according to Kim et al. (2012), a punitive culture inhibits the creation of a learning culture, leads to poor communication, and blocks the flow of information which is crucial in the innovation process.

This research focuses on two cultural phenomena, specifically *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur*, as cultural norms and practices that penalize innovators. Through these cultural norms and practices, organizational members who initially proposed improvements to the institution are forced to reproduce the old system. Furthermore, these two cultural phenomena are central to the emergence of *organizational atrophy*, which hinders innovation. Therefore, this research is relevant and useful for academics and researchers in organizational culture and innovation management. It is also vital for practitioners, higher education managers, and policymakers in the higher education sector.

To dissect the dynamics and reproduction of punitive culture in the higher education context, the research is divided into five sections. The first part discusses the theoretical standpoint on which the analysis is based. A brief discussion of punitive culture and cultural processes in innovation is also presented in this section. The second part briefly describes the ethnographic approach used as a research method. The third part discusses the business processes of higher education in Indonesia. A critical analysis of the mechanism for idea sharing and the power asymmetry in a university setting is described in the fourth part. In this section, the concepts of *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* are introduced and discussed. These then lead to the discussion of ‘organizational atrophy’ which weakens an organization’s power to innovate. The concluding section provides practical implications and theoretical contributions to the literature on innovation management, organizational culture, and university management.

**METHOD**

This research uses an ethnographic method as a qualitative approach which involves a multimodal and multisensory immersion into a research context (Pink & Morgan, 2013). Ethnography is referred to as multimodal since, in its implementation, various kinds of repertoire are used as a medium for interaction and data collection (Pink & Morgan, 2013). It is also referred to as multisensory because researchers rely on what is heard (through interview techniques) and felt through other senses (Pink, 2011). In either way, researchers’ immersion paves the way to an inner (emic) perspective on a phenomenon (Whitaker, 2017). This is in line with Hammersley’s (2018), which established that ethnography is appropriate when there is an absence in detailed descriptions of a particular phenomenon or process.

Deeper than just a ‘tool’, ethnography entails the ontological and epistemological stances of research (Fetterman, 2010). This paper, in particular, is written with a critical
viewpoint towards the innovation process in organizations. In this regard, the taken-for-grantedness of culture in organizational lives is de-familiarized (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2014). Instead of considering it as a natural feature of the world whose existence is objective but often goes unnoticed, organizational culture is formed through social interactions which tend to be ambiguous, not always coherent, and even contradictory (Alvesson, 2013). This is a critical standpoint that is adopted in this study. Instead of accepting the organization’s claim of support for innovation, this research examines the decoupling between the organization’s values and its practices (Bromley & Powell, 2012). This examination leads to the concept of ‘punitive culture’ which illuminates the dialectic between organizational culture and the innovation process.

Ethnographic studies generally provide a ‘thick description’ of a phenomenon through the deep observation and investigation of the actors involved (Freeman, 2014). In this research, such depth was obtained through two phases of research: the observation phase and the interpretation and analysis phase, which are carried out in parallel. The observation phase was more dominant at the beginning of the research period whilst the interpretation and analysis phases were more dominant at the end of the research period. The execution for each of these phases is described in the following sections.

Data Collection

This research is based on longitudinal observations at one of the faculties at a higher education institution in Java with the pseudonym “Unggul University”. Unggul University is an educational institution that is well-known by the local communities for its outstanding reputation. Furthermore, Unggul University’s embeddedness to the local society and culture is one of the key identities that is heavily promoted. During the period of observations, the university maintained its excellence through various kinds of accreditation, nationally and internationally. The duration of observation was 12 months from January to December 2019. Between January and June, the data collection process tended to be sporadic and less structured. From July to December, unique themes that emerged through field observations guided the data interpretation and analysis process. During the observation period, the first researcher was actively involved in the primary data collection process through involvement in various organizational routines, including formal meetings and informal dialogues with organizational members. The second researcher was more intensively involved in collecting secondary data such as documents and internal publications, including books, magazines, and meeting minutes. The three researchers have been involved in several campus routine agendas, such as anniversary and accreditation, which formed the basis for the documentation and reflection of the phenomenon under inquiry.

Data Interpretation and Analysis

The empirical data generated and collected during the observation phase were interpreted and analyzed. Unlike most ethnographic studies which tend to be written in solo, this study involves three researchers in calibrating and criticizing the interpretations of the phenomenon in the field. To be sure, the three researchers are cultural subjects at Unggul University and therefore they are inseparable from the context
under study. This familiarity may result in the perception of organizational culture as natural and unproblematic. To overcome this shortcoming, the three researchers engaged in a reflexive process by asking ‘who we are’, ‘why do we think this way’, and ‘what influence do the surroundings exert on us’ (Hibbert et al., 2014).

The interpretation and analysis processes were conducted through a continuous iteration between the induction and deduction processes, also called ‘abduction’ (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The inductive process began with the identification of usul mikul and ketiban sampur as a set of discourse that was ascribed with specific meanings. This discourse, which manifested mostly in speech and text, was then interpreted by paying attention to the relationship between events, subjects, and the language used (Alvesson, 2011). The initial interpretation stimulated the authors’ conceptual curiosity and triggered a search for relevant literature. At this stage, the deductive process began by bringing the conceptual understanding obtained from the literature to illuminate the empirical peculiarity. The iteration between the data and the literature culminated in the theorization of the phenomenon as the final abstraction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Prior to the presentation of the results, it is helpful to describe the historical background and the current global trends in higher education. In the early 19th century, modern higher education or universities were defined as places to teach knowledge. In this definition, the university's epicenter is in the dissemination of knowledge rather than the development and sophistication of knowledge. In the middle of the 20th century, there was a shift in the role of universities, specifically from knowledge dissemination to research. Teaching, in this phase, then changed role and became more instructional to provide students with qualifications or certifications instead of opportunities for each of them to discover the right way of learning. Contemporarily, criticism began to emerge against the corporatization of public institutions, including universities (see, for example, Carroll, 2013). Along with the popularity of standardization and the ‘franchise’ business model, which is the hallmark of McDonald’s, higher education experienced similar changes worldwide. Unggul University, as a player in the global arena, was affected by the pressure of industrialization and standardization of higher education.

Power Asymmetry and Positional Dichotomy

Although there is a wide variety in the practice of universities in various regions in Indonesia—as well as the large variation between universities within the same region—Unggul University has similar key characteristics as other universities. This includes (1) lecturers as intellectual machines and (2) academic staff as operational machines. ¹ There is an asymmetry of power between these two groups and the basic assumption is that lecturers have a higher degree of power than educational staff. For

¹ The positions of ‘lecturers’ (dosen) and ‘academic staff’ (tenaga kependidikan) are based on Permenristekdikti No. 44 of 2015 on National Higher Education Standards, Article 1 paragraphs 14 and 15.
instance, in the case of organizing an event, educational staff were more comfortable to be led by a lecturer (although more junior) than by a fellow academic staff (though more senior). Table 1 shows several distinguishing characteristics between lecturers and educational staff at Unggul University.

### Table 1

**Main characteristics of lecturers and academic staff**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Lecturer</th>
<th>Academic staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Operational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Peripheral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of work</td>
<td>Conceptual</td>
<td>Technical execution, problem-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattern of assignment</td>
<td>Mostly routine</td>
<td>Mostly routine and adhoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task time horizon</td>
<td>Tends to be long</td>
<td>Tend to be short</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Tends to be high</td>
<td>Tends to be low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Facilitative, collegial</td>
<td>Formal, directive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary data (2019)

Lecturers, on the one hand, play an essential role in Unggul University as the representation of higher education *par excellence*. The number of professors and the high level of publication, for example, contribute favorably to the increase of the accreditation score for Unggul University. The educational staff, on the other hand, do not necessarily boost the institution's ranking, though their skills greatly support the efficient operation of the organization. This is evident when there was a rotation of teaching staff in the Unggul University environment. It was difficult for a faculty whose academic staff was rotated to another unit to find a competent replacement with the same level of professionalism. Consequently, much of the administrative work piled up and delayed which resulted in, among others, the sluggish administrative process in the promotion of lecturers.

Lecturers at Unggul University were also characterized by a high level of diversity in terms of educational background, fields of interest and expertise, experience, and demographic background. Even though there were assimilation and interaction between lecturers with various backgrounds and interests, the work routine and assignment patterns created silos that fostered the reproduction of old value systems and ways of working instead of criticizing and correcting them. For example, in 2017, a department at Unggul University has stated its decision to make some changes to the curriculum for the undergraduate study program. However, it was not until early 2019 that the decision was followed up by the management and a concrete implementation strategy was evident only at the end of 2019. This delay is caused, among others, by the unwillingness to disrupt the existing work routine and by the potential insurgence for additional works due to the change.

Structural positions at Unggul University are rotational—not strictly hierarchical and tiered as in a corporate context with a clear separation between employees and employers. At Unggul University, both employees and employers are on the same side. This reciprocal relationship needs to be underlined because it forms the basis of mutual
trust and a sense of institutional ownership. Additionally, there was a strong sense of
togetherness which was reflected in the use of the metaphorical term “one family” to
embrace various sub-groups within the institution. However, as each sub-group grew
stronger, the differences between these sub-groups were also getting more prominent.
Keeping the “family” together was not an easy task because cliques and coalitions were
often formed behind the scene. Unggul University wished not only to maintain a family
spirit but also to drive professionalism and continuously improve its quality. This
inclination to stand on both sides—i.e. being a family and professional—leads to the
emergence of organizational paradoxes. One example of an organizational paradox at
Unggul University is when warnings were given to members who have violated mutual
consensus. From the perspective of professionalism and quality improvement,
punishments should be given immediately. However, based on a familial perspective, a
more lenient personal approach was ultimately preferred. This paradox raised a double
standard with the potential to disrupt the cohesiveness of the organization itself.

*Cultural Configurations and Punitive Practices in the Innovation Process*

When organizational culture is understood as a configuration of power and
relations, then in principle every organization tends to give more authority to certain
groups and limit others (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015). In other words, any cultural
configuration tends to be punitive towards one group and gives privileges to others. This
becomes a problem when there is a massive inequality of power between the “tradition
keepers” and new organization members.

The asymmetry of position between lecturers and academic staff are in line with
those between the “proposers” and the “tradition keepers.” Proposers, on the one hand,
are represented by the new members with strong intellectualism and a spirit of change.
They are generally represented by junior lecturers or those who just completed their
doctoral studies and returned to teach at the university. Due to their exposure during
their doctoral studies, proposers proposed their proposals with the motive of quality
improvement within the university.

Tradition keepers, on the other hand, are represented by senior members or those
holding structural positions in the management of the institution. Although not all senior
members and institution managers become tradition keepers, they play a conservative
role in maintaining and preserving the cultural values at Unggul University. Interestingly,
some tradition keepers without any structural position still exert a stronger influence
than current managers with structural positions. Based on the relationality between the
proposers and the tradition keepers, two cultural practices that are potentially punitive to
innovation emerge. Specifically, they are *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur.*

*USUL MIKUL*

*Usul mikul* is a Javanese phrase often used to describe a situation when proposers
are bound to carry out/bear (*mikul*) their proposal (*usul*). Figure 1 shows the mechanism
of this cultural practice.
First, the proposers and the tradition keepers are two different parties. The separation of the two entities is a precondition for the second aspect: a sharp contrast of authority between the proposers and the proposal recipients where the proposers are in a weaker position than the recipients. Third, there is a scarcity of resources with expertise in executing these proposals. Faced with the scarcity of resources, the proposers are simplistically perceived as experts and therefore more knowledgeable for the implementation of the proposal. The perception of expertise is simplistic because tradition keepers tend to downplay signs of incompetence shown by the proposers. Consequently, the process of proposing and the bearing back to the proposer has a hidden function. It is a performative stage for both the proposers and tradition keepers.

Table 2 shows the major themes and illustrative quotations collected from the observations at Unggul University. As shown in the table, the ideas conveyed by the proposers are weighed back to them. Accordingly, proposers are burdened with additional work outside of their primary tasks and functions without sufficient organizational support and/or additional resource allocation. The bearing back of proposals to the proposers, in turn, may lead to the reluctance on the proposers’ side to speak or voice an opinion, either formally or informally. In time, the proposers may as well choose to act more pragmatically (in favor of individual safety) rather than ‘acting up’ and get ‘punished’ in the form of additional work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reluctance to speak</td>
<td>During the meeting, I did not participate in the conversation because I knew this should be his work. I just did not want that, if I speak, I will be assigned to do the work. ... in the end, the meetings were just the bare minimum. There was no genuine desire to seek for a solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The bearing of proposals to the proposers</td>
<td>Mrs. X: Sir, I propose that we provide training to assist students in finding thesis ideas. Tradition Keeper: I think that is a good idea. Later, Mrs. X will fill in as an expert in that respect. Mr. Y: In my opinion, it is necessary to form a small team to develop the plan for curriculum change. Tradition keeper:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Can Mr. Y and other millennial lecturers be part of the small team?

When I heard these suggestions, I also thought that I had much work to do already.

Source: Primary data (2019)

**KETIBAN SAMPUR**

In contrast to *usul mikul*, *ketiban sampur* refers to the imposition of work to individuals without their consent. The term *ketiban* is a Javanese for befall. *Sampur*, according to the Big Indonesian Dictionary (KBBI), is "a narrow and long scarf, used as an accessory in dancing, draped over the shoulder or wrapped around the waist" (KBBI Daring, 2020). In one of the Indonesian traditional dances, there is an interaction where the dancer drapes the *sampur* to one of the audiences. When an audience is *ketiban sampur*, then the person touched by the *sampur* has to step forward and dance with the dancer. Similarly, organization members who are *ketiban sampur* should accomplish the tasks assigned by their superiors regardless of whether the duties are in alignment with their wishes. However, *ketiban sampur* is similar to *usul mikul* because there is a unilateral assignment of work that disrupts members' work routine. The mechanism for *ketiban sampur* is illustrated in Figure 2.

![Image of Figure 2](image_url)

**Figure 2**

**The process of assigning proposals to other organization members (*ketiban sampur*)**

Source: Primary data (2019)

Different from *usul mikul* which is more likely to occur in the context of change and innovation, the presence of *ketiban sampur* is more intensely felt in non-academic activities. If a higher education institution is to be true to its name, then the portion of activities carried out by lecturers should be more related to teaching, research, and service. However, at Unggul University, lecturers are often used as event organizers rather than instructors, researchers, and community advisors. Furthermore, the term 'service' is an opening for tradition keepers to normalize the assignment of tasks that are tangentially related to academic activities. Through the language of 'service', organization members should accept every work assigned to them without questioning why. In the Javanese term, this is called *nrimo ing pandum*. 
Table 3 shows the themes and illustrative quotations related to the practice of *ketiban sampur*. In this cultural practice, assignments are unilaterally assigned to new members of the organization. This practice is akin to the initiation ritual for the new members where they have virtually no bargaining power because they are on probation. They did not get protection from their seniors during the orientation and acculturation process. Instead, the variety of new assignments were presented as an immersion process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unilateral assignment</td>
<td>Tradition keeper: I need your help to become the head of unit X. New member: Very sorry, but X is not my field of competence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tradition keeper: I am sure you can. I used to be that way too.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Junior lecturers usually fill in for the course X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sir [...] I get the disposition from [...] that you will be the speaker at the [...] event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting assignments</td>
<td>For me, I just accept the assignment first and think about it later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Although later, I might be confused on how to do it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When I got such an assignment, I realized that if I declined, it would be a burden for other lecturers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workload shifting</td>
<td>What needs to be considered is the administrative burden of the lecturers. It has to be reduced, even though the substance of the work will increase. Helping students is good. Helping lecturers is also good. Lecturers can be victims of students and the system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is a law of immutability of work, sir. That “work cannot be destroyed but shifted to others.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Primary data (2019)

Discussion

The findings of this study may not be new for several reasons. The two cultural practices mentioned earlier (*usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur*) can also be perceived as representations of ‘extra roles’, that is, a contextual work outside of the job requirements or core tasks (Netemeyer et al., 2005). In this paper, organization members are expected to make greater efforts to satisfy the needs of various external parties, such as customers and government, as well as internal parties such as faculty managers and program managers. Presented with this condition, organization members need to accept additional assignments determined by the managers, as shown in Table 2. The tendency for a punitive culture gives organization members additional roles. Consequently, it adds to the stress of the individuals since they need to put in extra efforts, which should have been used to accomplish the core work and tasks. If the resulting stress is unfavorable, then it becomes an obstacle for individuals and organizations. It hampers the motivation to achieve organizational goals and is counterproductive to innovation (Pisano, 2019).
From the lens of organizational behavior, *ketiban sampur* can be understood as a form of work stress and this is an old topic in the literature (Jex & Gudanowski, 1992). This study does not negate this view. It instead reveals that the resulting work stress from *ketiban sampur* is not evenly distributed but falls on a certain group of individuals. Furthermore, instead of looking at *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* as mere forms of work stress, this study examines how these two cultural phenomena inhibit organizational innovation (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Over time, organization members' fear of *usul mikul* and their powerlessness to be free from *ketiban sampur* encourage them to seek individual security rather than organizational security. To elaborate on this contradiction, it is key to discuss the role of tradition in higher education.

**Tradition and Higher Education**

Higher education legitimizes itself as a place where intellectualism and rationality are upheld. Its existence is also legitimized by the general public on the assumption that university is the vanguard of innovation. For example, research methods taught in higher education are critical towards logical thinking and the rationale behind the acceptance and rejection of opinions and/or propositions. The curriculum is structured in a way that ensures students to develop their rationality and analytical powers. These learning processes culminate in the writing of scientific papers to be tested based on logic. In contrast to these principles, when the interaction in higher education shifts from lecturer-to-student to lecturer-to-lecturer, intellectualism and rationality that are sacred in the teaching process are not immediately applicable. Instead, the reins of the highest power are held by a cultural component called tradition.

In simple terms, tradition means something that continues or is transmitted from the past to the present (Dacin et al., 2019). In the context of higher education, those who understand and abide by the traditions of the organization are placed in a more advantageous position than those who do not. Moreover, Unggul University explicitly emphasizes tradition as one of its core values. Organizational sustainability has been equated with the preservation of tradition. As a result, there is a strong belief that what existed in the past must be continued in the future because eliminating or changing traditions means changing the meaning of the organization (Türe & Ger, 2016). Yet, innovation means change, which implies discontinuation from the past. When something does not continue, then part of the tradition is under threat. Higher education then becomes a paradoxical context where intellectual development demands innovation, but at the same time innovation will threaten the stability of the very tradition that has become an institutional identity. For members, intellectuality is needed to be part of the organization, but at the same time ‘meta’-intellectuality called tradition is also required for their survival in the organization.

*Usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* are phrases that are closely related to the local Javanese culture. These phrases are deeply embedded in the daily lives of organization members and thus rarely considered as problematic. Instead of questioning the practices that these terms imply, organization members tend to normalize them as part of the natural environment that they live. This results in two things: first, organization members take *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* as the right way of doing things and, secondly, the acceptance of such practice will encourage existing members of the organization to
reproduce the culture to new members. Thus, higher education and innovation are two elements that, at first glance, seem compatible but are contradictory.

**Atrophic Cycle as Obstacles to Organizational Innovation**

Based on the empirical phenomena discussed in the previous section, *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* have a general tendency to trigger the cycle of ‘atrophy’. This term is borrowed from the field of gerontology and physiology. Broadly speaking, atrophy means the loss of muscle mass caused by aging and/or disuse (Evans & Lexell, 1995; Powers et al., 2007). Inspired by this definition, atrophy is used in this paper as a metaphor to imply the potential loss of the innovation “muscle” in an organization. More formally, organizational atrophy is defined as *a condition when an organization experiences a decline in the power to innovate due to the disuse of capabilities over time*. This definition carries at least three key dimensions: time, disuse of capability, and the degradation of power. Each of these dimensions is explained in the following.

The first dimension is time. Time allows for the organizational dynamics and, through it, organizations grow and decline. This means that atrophy does not just happen but goes through a long process that may not be readily perceivable. The second dimension is the disuse of capabilities. Organizations that are comprised of highly intellectual individuals should have possessed high capabilities. However, this capability will not fully manifest if there is no chance to exercise and (re)train their area of expertise. The third dimension is the degradation of power. Akin to healthy muscles, a healthy organization works and achieves its goals effectively. Atrophy, in contrast, hinders the organizations from working effectively. As a result, organizations require greater energy to carry out the same task and may as well lead to failure to achieve their targets. Figure 3 shows the chain reaction that initiates the atrophic cycle.
As a starting point is the awareness of organizational members of the need for organizational change (1). With this awareness, organizational members who see the potential for improvement will convey ideas or proposals to the management/authority in the organization (2). These proposals are then faced with two different routes. The first path is when the proposals are accepted by the management/authority, but the follow-up of the proposals is borne back to the proposers (3a). The second path is when the proposals are accepted but the follow-up is unilaterally assigned to other organization members (3b). To be sure, both *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* are neutral practices, not inherently bad or good. However, when there are no slack resources in the organizations and the follow-up or execution of new ideas is perceived as an additional burden beyond members’ main responsibility (4), then members tend to avoid additional work that is beyond their main performance indicators (5). This is for the simple reason that an additional burden jeopardizes the individual survival within the organization.

Some organization members, especially those with a certain position and power asymmetry, may shift the additional burden to other members. However, for other organization members with no power to evade such assignments, they will learn that it is better not to get too much involved in the ideation process (6). If this tendency occurs in many individuals and widespread to other members, then collectively, the organization’s rate of new ideas decreases (7).
This cycle of atrophy is circular and epidemic. When the proposals are transformed into *usul mikul* or *ketiban sampur*, there will be a noticeable drop of proposals in the future. This creates a vicious circle that further weakens the organizational capabilities. Furthermore, organization members who feel powerless tend to restrain their thoughts and withdraw from the ideation process to avoid *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur*. This behavior, once displayed, may also be followed by other colleagues, thus creating an epidemic. There are some indications of these characteristics, for instance, when meetings become monotonous and lacking in dialectics, communication patterns become more formal and transactional, communication networks such as WhatsApp groups get quieter, and the formation of subgroups (usually also through WhatsApp groups) which exclude the tradition keepers.

Organizational atrophy is related to but different from organizational inertia. Inertia is a condition when an organization changes at a slower rate than the surrounding environment (Godkin, 2010). Atrophy, in contrast, is the weakening of organizational capability due to the non-optimal use of its potential. The condition of atrophy can be illustrated as a supercar racing on a racetrack. The car could have been driven up to high speed but can only go slower because there is no proper engine maintenance and/or skillful driver. This means organizational atrophy is a form of degradation of organizational capability due to members' failure to exploit its full potential.

In management literature, organizational atrophy is closer to the notion of ‘functional stupidity’ coined by Alvesson and Spicer (2012, 2016). Functional stupidity, they argue, occurs when an organization inhibits its members from thinking reflexively and members refuse to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and ‘safe’ terrain (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). Stupidity in this context is functional because it reduces conflict and brings a sense of security to the organization. By not questioning, conflicts do not surface. At the Unggul University, deliberate unquestioning of the status quo keeps organization members out of trouble. This stupidity provides a short-term sense of security at the individual level. Nevertheless, when it continues and turns into organizational atrophy, then it is the institution that is held as a hostage.

**CONCLUSION**

This article examined the cultural aspects of the innovation process at a higher education institution in Java. Through an ethnographic approach, it is revealed that *usul mikul* and *ketiban sampur* were cultural practices that covertly penalized organization members who proposed innovation. With limited institutional resources and excessive workload, organization members are faced with two choices: to survive with the consequence of reproducing the old system, or to bring about change and bear a greater burden. Unfortunately, without explicit institutional support for the innovation process, members often choose to survive with the first choice, thus leading to the cycle of organizational atrophy.

This study has two practical implications. First, the management of higher education institutions needs to establish an explicit and fair mechanism for ideation and resource distribution. This step is essential to ensure that proposers feel safe in putting forward their ideas. Second, managers should lead the cultural change and innovation and
take responsibility for these. This is not an easy task because the management of higher education institutions is collegial, reciprocal, and rotational. More importantly, a proactive role is increasingly needed in creating synergies and building networks inside and outside of the institution. From the regulatory point of view, this study voices a critique of the legal bases for structural officeholders. The lecturers’ structural position in the university environment is considered as an ‘additional task’ according to the law. This is contradictory to the complex responsibility of a rector, dean, or head of a department which requires primary attention, not secondary. Therefore, by placing these roles and responsibilities secondary may contribute to the organizational atrophy in higher education institutions.

Future research is advised to explore the dual role of organizational culture that supports and hinders innovation culture (Sharifirad & Ataei, 2012; Valencia et al., 2010). Further, the concept of organizational atrophy is a construct that can be developed through a quantitative approach. This approach may complement, confirm, or even nullify the propositions offered in this study more comprehensively. Future research should also examine the ambiguity of cultural practices that are considered “natural” by organization members. This study has shown that attention to local traditions enriches the literature on innovation theory and higher education management which are often dominated by non-Eastern contexts. For example, future research may focus on other cultural contexts to determine whether a punitive tradition is limited only to Javanese culture or it is an inherent attribute in other Eastern cultures.

Finally, this study resonates with Rahmawati and Taylor (2018), which stated that “the fish does not aware of the water where it swims.” Like water is to fish, culture is a hidden force capable of normalizing social practices and basic assumptions. Ontologically, researchers should not take things for granted. Usul mikul and ketiban sampur elaborated in this study are some of the everyday cultural phenomena for members of the Javanese culture but are highly valuable to be theorized. Unfortunately, studies that deconstruct traditions are still limited. This is undoubtedly a promising opportunity. Scholars in management science should not miss the opportunity to contribute theoretically due to the ignorance of the various management and organizational phenomena.

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REFERENCES


2 See Presidential Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 65/2007 concerning Lecturer Allowances. Article 2 states that “Lecturers can be given additional assignments to lead higher education institutions as Rectors, Assistant Rectors, Deans, Assistant Deans, Heads of High Schools, Assistant Heads, Polytechnic Directors, Academy Directors, and Assistant Directors.”


