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# Instilling Religious Knowledge and Practice as A Way to Prevent Deprivation among *Parmalim* People as An Indigenous Religious Minority Group in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Parmalim is an indigenous religion from the ancient Toba Batak and has been categorized by the government as one of the “local” religions in Indonesia. They have been struggling to keep their community accepted among society. Furthermore, they often made comparisons between their group situation with other “formal” religious groups in terms of the institutional treatment regarding their civil data administration, the religious studies in the school, the building progress of the worship house, and their job opportunities. This study aims to present the descriptive result of the impact of instilling religious knowledge and practice as a way to prevent group relative deprivation among Parmalim people in Medan using a descriptive qualitative method. The Relative Deprivation theory was arranged from (Smith et al., 2014) theory using three components of RD, such as cognitive comparison, cognitive appraisal, and justice-related effect. The religious knowledge and practice are divided into Parmalim core values and customs such as Tona (Religious teaching), Poda (Commandment), Patik (Canon), and Uhum (Law). The result of this study had shown that Parmalim people in Medan possessed low group relative deprivation as an impact of the religious knowledge and practice that have been instilled among them.

## Keywords

group relative deprivation, indigenous religion, Medan, *Parmalim*, religious knowledge and practice

## 1 Introduction

Indigenous religion or commonly known in Indonesia as “Local religion” is a religion derived from the indigenous people of Indonesia. According to Barret and Johnson (2003) in the International Bulletin of Missionary Research, the adherents of the local religion in the world composed of 3,78% of the world population. In Indonesia, the adherents of local religion composed of 1% from the Indonesian population. Most of them live in rural areas such as Sumatra’s, Kalimantan’s, Sulawesi’s, and Java’s inland.

According to Saifudin (2000), religion in Indonesian terminology is used as a political-administrative way by the government to differentiate “Official Religion” such as Islam, Christian Protestant, Catholic, Hinduism, Buddhism and Konghucu and the indigenous religion or “Local Religion” such as Parmalim, Pemenan, Kejawan, and many more. The consequences of the labeling aforementioned have influenced the existence of these indigenous religious minority groups.

### 1. The Historical and Present Situation of *Parmalim*

Parmalim is an indigenous religion originate from the ancient Toba Batak culture that is being centered in Hutatinggi. The religion has emerged from the Toba Batak culture, as a means to protect the indigenous culture and religion from foreign influences. The word “Parmalim” derived from Toba Batak language meaning the adherents of *Hamalimon* or holiness. *Par* means the adherents, and *Malim* means holiness. Parmalim is developed in Hutatinggi village by the spiritual leader named Raja Mulia Naipos-pos in 1921 whom the disciple of Sisingamangaraja XII in the Dutch colonialism era (Hirosue, 2005).

Parmalim as an indigenous religious minority group in Indonesia has experienced social pressure, not only from the government but from society in general, especially from the “formal” religious institution. Oftentimes, they have been stigmatized as “*Sipelebegu*” or a bad spirit worshiper, and they have been



discriminated in the administrative processes (such as to get the identity card, birth certificate, marriage certificate, etc.), job opportunities, and a license to build a worship house. Up until now, they still fighting to maintain their existence and strive for justice to be accepted as equal as the formal religions in terms of rights.

Due to their condition, some of them willing to disguise themselves as a “formal religion” believer by choosing to label themselves as Islam or Christian in the identity card, but some still maintain their identity by choosing not to identify with the “formal religion”. The consequences of identifying themselves as Parmalim sometimes jeopardize the chance of getting into certain jobs or being bullied by friends and colleagues.

## 2. Religious Knowledge and Practice

The religious knowledge and practice are divided into Parmalim core values and customs such as *Tona* (Religious teaching), *Poda* (Commandment), *Patik* (Canon), and *Uhum* (Law). *Tona* is a religious teaching that received by human from *Debata Mulajadi Nabolon* (god). In *Tona*, the teachings focus on how to maintain a healthy relationship between humans, nature, and god as there are also requirements to serve offerings (*pelean*) in the rituals. *Poda*, in Parmalim known as a commandment, such as “*Ikkon malim parhundulun*” (Purity in sitting), “*Ikkon malim parmanganon*” (Purity in eating), “*Ikkon malim parmerengon*” (Purity in seeing), “*Ikkon malim panghataion*” (Purity in speaking), and “*Ikkon malim pardalanan*” (Purity in walking). *Patik* (Canon) is a canon concerning the religious rituals, and *Uhum* is the law in the Parmalim group (I. Harahap, 2000).

### 1.3 Relative Deprivation

Relative deprivation is the judgment that one is worse off compared to some standard (example: social class, money, achievements, power, political power, etc.) accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment (Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012). Comparing one’s situation to another situation is one of the key components to judge the situation and to make an evaluation of whether or not justice is being served.

Relative deprivation defined as a judgment that one or one’s ingroup is disadvantaged compared to a relevant referent and that this judgment invokes feelings of anger, resentment, and entitlement (Smith & Pettigrew, 2014). When it came to defining whether or not an individual is experiencing relative deprivation, there are three psychological processes involves : (1) They make cognitive comparisons first, (2) then followed by the cognitive appraisals whether or not their group is disadvantaged, and (3) these disadvantages are seen as unfair and results in the feeling of angry resentment. The three processes must meet in order to conclude whether relative deprivation is happening (Smith et al., 2012).

The focus of the psychological concept of relative deprivation is more to the subjective interpretation of their situation or ingroup situation rather than the objective reality of one’s situation. People could feel that they are lack something when they are objectively not (People that are being treated unfairly or being discriminated believing that they are not experiencing such treatments) and vice versa.

#### 1.3.1 Individual Relative Deprivation and Group Relative Deprivation

Smith & Pettigrew (2015) also differentiate Relative Deprivation as Individual Relative Deprivation and Group Relative Deprivation. Individual Relative Deprivation, is the comparison one make between (1) their past or future self, (2) their situation and the ingroup situation, (3) their situation with the other person’s situation outside their group whereas the Group Relative Deprivation is the comparison one make between (1) their ingroup with their outgroup and/or (2) the ingroup past or future situation. After the comparison being made, then one regards the disparities as unfair, thinks that one deserves better, and accompanied by angry resentment.

As a means to understand the social psychological perspective of Parmalim people towards their situation as an indigenous religious minority group in Indonesia, the qualitative research has been done to try to understand the impact of religious knowledge and practice as a way to prevent Relative Deprivation.

The current research intends to investigate the following research questions:

- The differences in individual relative deprivation and group relative deprivation of Parmalim people
- To what extent that role of religious knowledge and practice effects relative deprivation among Parmalim People

- To what extent is the Parmalim People living experience of relative deprivation characterised by dissatisfaction, anger and resentment Smith & Pettigrew (2014)

## 2 Methods

### 2.1 Participants

This study used a descriptive qualitative method to describe the impact of instilling religious knowledge and practice as a way to prevent relative deprivation among Parmalim people as an indigenous religious minority in Indonesia. The research used purposive sampling to gain samples that best fit the population with particular characteristics (Hadi, 2000). The population of Parmalim people in Medan is 373 people, and the samples were 3 people. Participants in this study were 3 people including one “*Ulu Punguan*” (the worship leader in the Medan city area) and two worship members of the community. Participants also chose from the different members of the age group that belong to early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood with the male and female gender. The samples’ job background identifies as a freelance worker, a university student, and one retirement.

The characteristics in this study were: Parmalim People by birth (not the ones that have converted from other religion); Parmalim people age 17-65; Parmalim people who speak the Indonesian language well; Parmalim people who identify themselves as a member of Parmalim religion to the public (and also in their identity card and other certificates); Parmalim people live in Medan city; Parmalim people whom experience mistreatments or witness the mistreatments of Parmalim people.

### 2.2 Procedures

In this research, several steps were done in the data retrieval and the first stage is to determine the sample research. The sample of this study is Parmalim people living in Medan with the aforementioned characteristics. Sampling in this study is using purposive sampling. The second step is the researcher’s visitation to the participant’s residence and explaining in advance the purpose of the study and asked for their willingness to participate in the research by giving an informed consent to be filled. The third stage is to conduct interviews based on the interview guidelines that have been made by researchers.

The research gathered semi-structured interviews that the researcher sets on the agenda according to the main interests and topics but allows room for the spontaneous descriptions and narratives (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). The interview guidelines are made based on Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, and Bialosiewicz’s theory of Relative Deprivation (Smith et al., 2012).

### 2.3 Measures

The first stage in this research is designing interview guidelines based on the Relative Deprivation theory by Smith et. al based on the three psychological processes (cognitive comparisons, cognitive appraisals, and justice-related affect). The religious knowledge and practice are divided into Parmalim core values and customs such as *Tona* (Religious teaching), *Poda* (Commandement), *Patik* (Canon), and *Uhum* (Law). The second stage is to conduct interviews based on the interview guidelines that have been made by researchers on 3 Parmalim people who fulfilled the characteristics. The third step is data analysis using interpretative phenomenological analysis as a means to understands the subjective experience and the meaning attached by the participant to their lived experience (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015).

## 3 Results

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis revealed the experience of the Parmalim People to be a complex emotion influenced by Parmalim religious knowledge and practice that influenced by their perceived group situation. The participants’ description reflects Smith’s theory of Relative Deprivation. Analysis illuminated three superordinate themes: 1) Cognitive Comparisons, 2) Cognitive Appraisal, and 3) Justice-Related Affect.

### **3.1 The Differences in Individual Relative Deprivation and Group Relative Deprivation of Parmalim People**

This research found that Parmalim people possess lower group relative deprivation than the individual relative deprivation, meaning that, when comparing their (personal) situation with other person situation (on the “formal” religion counterpart) in terms of discrimination, they felt that their (personal) situation is not worse off. On the counterpart, the research showed that when comparing their group situation with other groups (from the “formal” religion) situation, they feel more deprived, and still finds that injustice happens within their group.

### **3.2 The Extent of Religious Knowledge and Practice Implication on The Relative Deprivation of Parmalim People**

The consistent theme that occurs is how the Parmalim people always focus on themselves and what they can contribute to society instead of the lack and the misfortunes of their situation. The teaching of *Tona* (Religious teaching), *Poda* (Commandment), *Patik* (Canon), and *Uhum* (Law) had a strong influence and had constructed the way Parmalim people sees their situation. From the rituals “*Sipahasada*” and “*Sipahalima*” that focus on give thanks and celebrating the earth and livestock, they have shown that the main focus on how to make the world a better place by maintaining and preserve not only culture but the physical surroundings.

### **3.3 The Justice-Related Effect of Relative Deprivation in Parmalim People**

The justice-related effect in relative deprivation is still not significant due to the lack of feeling of anger and resentment that they project. One of the key components of the Relative Deprivation theory is that one must have the feeling of anger and resentment towards the situation. Parmalim people shown less of the anger feeling, but more of the sadness, and disappointment with the withdrawal attitude towards their situation.

## **4 Discussion**

On the previous research by Harahap (2018) “The differences between Individual Relative Deprivation (IRD) and Group Relative Deprivation (GRD) among Parmalim People in Medan” had shown that Parmalim possesses Relative Deprivation in the medium level with a slight difference in the IRD and GRD, relating to age difference and sex. Crosby & Bearman (2006) consider that individual oftentimes focused on the group relative deprivation, as a means to decrease their individual relative deprivation. Crosby (1982) in her research “Relative Deprivation and Working Women” conclude that Individual Relative Deprivation can be different according to the sex. In her paper, she concludes women felt more Individual Relative Deprivation than Group Relative Deprivation resulting that Women feel more deprived and feel discriminated in the workplace judging by their own (personal) situation and not seeing the discrimination felt for Women in general.

Another research by Callan, Kim, & Matthews (2015) in “Age Differences in Social Comparison Tendency and Personal Relative Deprivation” has shown that older people tend to make less social comparison and resulting in a lower individual relative deprivation. The tendency to make social comparison will mediate the relationship between age and individual relative deprivation. The individuals in the age range of more than 60 shown to make a less social comparison then individuals in the 18-30 age range.

This research found that Parmalim people possess lower group relative deprivation than the individual relative deprivation, meaning that, when comparing their (personal) situation with other person’s situation (on the “formal” religion counterpart) in terms of discrimination, they felt that their (personal) situation is not worse off. On the counterpart, the research showed that when comparing their group situation with other groups (from the “formal” religion) situation, they feel more deprived, and still finds that injustice happens within their group. The Parmalim people possess higher Group Relative Deprivation then the Individual Relative Deprivation. The results approve the research conducted by Zagefka and Brown (2005) “Comparisons and Perceived Deprivation in Ethnic Minority Settings” that

found the feeling of deprivation may be different depending on the reference group that being chosen. The individual that comes from ethnic minority will feel more deprived when comparing themselves with the group of people from the majority group than when they make a comparison with the other minority groups.

## 5 Conclusion

*Parmalim* people, as an indigenous religious minority group despite having been in a position of discriminated and stigmatized, still try to find positive meaning in their situations. The positive attitude that derived from the religious knowledge and teaching that they maintain and the rituals that they preserve has led to a lower relative deprivation. Even though, the group relative deprivation is higher than the individual relative deprivation. It still not in the alarming state due to the lack of anger and resentment feelings that they have towards their situation.

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