

Digital Press Social Sciences and Humanities

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The 11th International Conference on Nusantara Philosophy

Rangga Kala Mahaswa, Taufiqurrahman (eds)

Legacy of Colonialism and Indigenous Religious Resilience: A Study of Marapu Belief in East Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

Indigenous religions encompass spiritual customs originating from the ancestral heritage of specific ethnic and geographical groups. These traditional beliefs often come into conflict with state-recognised official religions, a consequence of modernity's tendency to streamline religion into a mere belief system. In line with this, the post-colonial view sees that indigenous religions which are repressed by the state are the result of the state's view of showing Western superiority. Indonesia bears the enduring legacy of colonialism, manifesting as negative perceptions that persistently affect to indigenous religions. One of the colonial legacies is sociological, psychological, and moral problems, besides physics and material heritage. According to Syeid Hussen Alatas in the *Myth of Lazy Natives* (1989), this is the greatest damage caused by colonialism because this problem hinders solutions to other problems. Indonesia, as a geographical region, has many indigenous religions, one of which is the Marapu belief in Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara. Many adherents of the Marapu faith are forced to embrace one religion for the purposes of population administration, but at the same time continue to practice their beliefs. This article aims to unravel how Marapu followers uphold their ritual practices within the confines of their traditional religion and how the enduring colonial legacy shaped local religious observances. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method by focusing on a literature review with research data sources from journals and documentary videos. The research finding of this enquiry is the exploration of the intersection between religion and society and how post-colonial perspectives have seen this phenomenon.

Keywords

indigenous religions, Marapu, post-colonial, colonialism, western religion

1 Introduction

Indigenous religions originating from the ancestral heritage of specific ethnic and geographical groups. Indonesia (or Nusantara, if used a socio-cultural term) as archipelagic country has a multitude of beliefs that embraced by its people, including Aluk Todolo in Toraja, Aluk Mappurondo in Mamasa, Sunda Wiwitan in West Java, Kaharingan in Kalimantan, Arat Sabulungan in Mentawai, and various others. These beliefs existed long before Indonesia was declared a state in 1945.

Most religions in Indonesia are Islam, Christians, Catholics, Hindus, Buddha, and Confucianism. The existence of these six religions is guaranteed and provides legal protection as well as assistance from the state. However, this legal framework inadvertently marginalises other religions, creating a distinction between officially recognised religions and those considered unofficial (Rohidin, 2023). These unofficial religions, as references to traditional beliefs, often come into conflict with state-recognised official religions. This can be seen as a consequence of modernity's tendency to streamline religion into a mere belief system. This bias is evident in how indigenous faiths are compelled to select from officially recognised religions listed on the Identity Card (Jufri, 2016).

When we trace this discriminatory perspective to indigenous beliefs, it comes from a postcolonial legacy that is internalised by society. The colonial perspective, which internalised the social and political aspects, probably came from the Dutch, who had colonised Indonesia for approximately 350 years. Thus, the post-colonial view sees indigenous religions as the result of the Western superiority perspectives of the state.

The authority and theocentric perspective in Western culture has enabled the invention of modern genres or modes of man (Wynter, 2003). Colonial legacies are not only physical and material heritage but also sociological, psychological, and moral problems. This is the greatest damage caused by colonialism because it hinders solutions to other problems (Alatas, 2013).

One of the indigenous beliefs still practiced by the people of East Nusa Tenggara is Marapu. According to Central Berau of Statistics, the total population of East Nusa Tenggara is 5.569.068 people (BPS, 2023). Marapu adherents can be found in Tarung Village West Sumba Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province, with a Marapu percentage of 37.91%, Catholics 31.52%, Christians 30.15%, and Muslims 0.42% (Wedasantara, 2023). Marapu belief has been studied in some schools in East Nusa Tenggara, but the fact is that they do not have the freedom to practice their beliefs. One of the recent cases is Yuliana Leda Tera, who was expelled from the classroom because she claimed to be of the Marapu. She was also forced to hide her identity to continue her studies.

The Marapu adherents are identified by a dash (-) in the religious column on their Identity Cards (KTP). Consequently, they face significant repercussions: their customary marriage system lacks acknowledgment, depriving them of the right to possess Marriage and Family Cards. Moreover, their children often encounter obstacles or outright impossibilities when obtaining birth certificates. The absence of recognition of these fundamental aspects of identity creates barriers to accessing education, employment, and governmental assistance or subsidies in Indonesia. The exclusion experienced by Marapu practitioners is intricately layered and multifaceted.

This article explores post-colonial perspectives on indigenous beliefs, focusing on Marapu as a case study. This article explains the lasting effects of post-colonialist legacies on local religious customs in Indonesia and illustrates how Marapu followers have maintained their rituals in recent times. The purpose of this article is to extend the theories of post-colonialism by using indigenous belief discrimination in Indonesia.

2 Methods

The methodology employed in this research is qualitative, a commonly used approach in socio-cultural anthropological research. This explanation in this article is used to elaborate and enrich a theory's on post-colonialism related to an impact to indigenous belief in Indonesia. This research utilized descriptive analysis to depict and uncover social realities of Marapu People in East Nusa Tenggara.

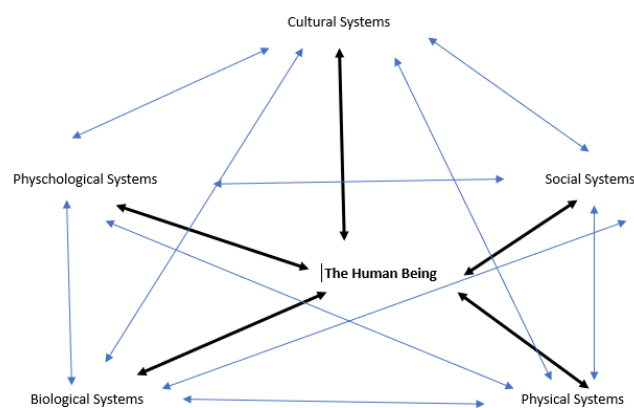


Fig. 1. Methodology in Anthropology seeks to discover the interrelationships between various scientific models of the human being. Source: <https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/points.htm>

Some literature used as research data sources, the utilization of these sources allows for a multifaceted exploration of post-colonial perspectives. The literature review forms the backbone of this research, enabling a nuanced understanding of the historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions that frame the post-colonial lens through which indigenous beliefs are viewed. By synthesising information from academic journals and visual media sources, this study aims to construct a comprehensive narrative that sheds light on the enduring effects of post-colonialism on the Marapu belief system, thereby contributing

to a deeper understanding of the complexities of indigenous beliefs within the Indonesian context. In this kind of method, the author uses interview, observation, document, and audiovisual data to make patterns of interpretation (Creswell, 2014).

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Colonialism Perspectives Towards Indigenous Religion

There are several perspectives on the construction of indigenous peoples. In perspectives of “realist” discourse, indigenous seen more as pragmatic political strategy (Tyson, 2010). They are perceived primarily as a practical political tactic, rather than solely as an inherent cultural or ethnic identity. This implies that the recognition of indigeneity is approached from a pragmatic viewpoint that indicates that individuals or groups strategically utilise their indigenous identity for strategic purposes rather than as a purely cultural or historical designation.

Conversely, there’s a more “speculative” discourse surrounding indigeneity, suggesting it’s a response to the Anthropocene, where indigenous identities are used to envision ways of existence (Chandler, 2020). Within this context, indigenous identities are not just seen as historical or cultural markers, but are speculated to be actively employed to imagine and create new ways of existence or living in response to the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. Essentially, this implies that indigenous identities are considered not just as traditional markers but also as sources of inspiration for reimagining and shaping future ways of life.

Understanding indigenous religions in Indonesia is best approached through a realistic lens. This is due to the intricate connections between fundamental concepts like ‘religion,’ ‘secularism,’ ‘race,’ and ‘reason,’ which significantly shaped and maintained the dominance of colonial modernity. Post-colonisation countries like Indonesia seek to reconstruct their cultural identity and restore their sense of self-worth in response to the impact of colonialism and the notion of modernity, often termed as civilisation. Most Third World countries or colonial countries are burdened by this perspective. In the book “Indigenous Myths of Laziness” by Syed Hussein Alatas (1987), it is explained that the vices of the native population can be considered historical needs. They must be humbled and made to feel stupid and submissive because otherwise they will rebel.

Besides that, the illustration of indigenous people is not simply described as a society lacking values. It is not enough for colonialists to confirm that those values had disappeared or even better never existed in the colonial period. Indigenous people are unable to feel ethics; it symbolises not only the absence of values but also the elimination of values (Fanon, 2022; Dei, 2010). Fanon sees that colonisers exposed the natives to both mental and physical violence, which has had long-lasting effects on their emotional health long after the colonisers left. Fanon insinuates that colonialism denied the colonised people all the characters of humanity. Colonialism resulted in dehumanisation through mental and physical violence to inculcate servile mentality on the natives. Furthermore, Fanon agreed that the natives did not have a choice other than to resist colonialism through violence.

During Dutch colonial rule, the Sumbanese people were considered stupid, superstitious, lazy, worthless, neglected (Fox, 1996), warlike, and headhunters (Hoskins, 2002). Often, the Gospel preachers see them as hard-hearted primitive people, infidels who are on the road to destruction and darkness (Wellem, 2004). This gives the picture that there are forces that form views about “Sumba people”. Formation of Western construction in this colonial case the people of Sumba will affect the attitude of the Indonesian government during independence, so that its image demeaning the people of Sumba has not disappeared until now. This is different from the view that the Sumbanese regard themselves as part of a civilised society (Soeriadiredja, 2016).

3.2 Central Concept and the Rituals of Marapu

Several concepts within Marapu rituals are interconnected. These concepts encompass both joyful and sorrowful experiences, serving as guiding principles in their lives, particularly in their endeavours to uphold harmony with the Supreme Being, ancestors, nature, the community, and within themselves.

Rato

Rato Adat is a person who has internal authority communicate with the ancestors who are addressed in traditional events, like: *Wulla Poddu*, construction of *Umma Kalada*, *Wanno Kalada*, *Pasola* and several sacred rituals that are still maintained today. In this important ceremony that determines the lives of many people, Rato does *samadhi*. The goal is to seek and obtain harmony of human feelings, thoughts and souls with the feelings of the Creator who is believed to be *Mawulu Tau* (Creator of Man) which is called with various metaphors: *Belleka Katillu – Kalada Mata // Dapa Teki Ngara – Dapa Zuma Tamo* (In Sumba *Wewewa* language: Yang Bertelinga Lebar- bermata besar // Yang tidak bisa disebutkan Nama-Nya – Yang gelar-Nya pun tidak bisa disebutkan sembarangan).



Fig 2. Rato from *Bukubani* comes back from ritual *Weri mara*.

Weri Mara is a ritual to make nature sacred, especially beaches and the sea. This sacralisation is also related to the awareness of the sacred history of origins and Toda's identity. The general public, government, and all parties who follow this ritual and/or hearing the news that there is a *weri mara* on the beach and sea along these four kilometres, must comply with all the provisions that have been made sacred in the ceremony. All trees and wood on the beach must not be harmed or removed. Grass and weeds around the beach must not be removed or burned. Humans are not allowed to enter and damage sacred beaches and seas. All activities on beaches and seas must be stopped.

This ritual can be viewed as conserving the environment. Protection by indigenous communities is interpreted as a form of conservation. Conservation always has direct consequences for nature that are accepted by the person who consciously performs actions that violate and harm nature. This process took approximately three months. All that time is sufficient for the development and growth of organisms in the sea, coastal plants, and reproduction of animals that live in the sea and on the coast.

These rituals reflect reasoning capacities among the human populations in East Nusa Tenggara. Certain people, such as Rato, are close to Nature and God.

Katoda

Katoda are the places where marapu live, usually marked with signs in the form of piles of stones. Cathodes can be found in fields, gardens, villages, and houses. In the house, *katoda* was placed at the top of the ceiling of the house as well as an attic store's valuable objects.



Fig 3. *Pasola* Attraction

Ana Tau

Image of a naked Sumbanese man with stretched arms. Sometimes carved on gravestones, weavings, or house pillars. This image symbolises the innocence and freedom of the human spirit; also as the expression that before the “All-Knowing” there is nothing hidden.

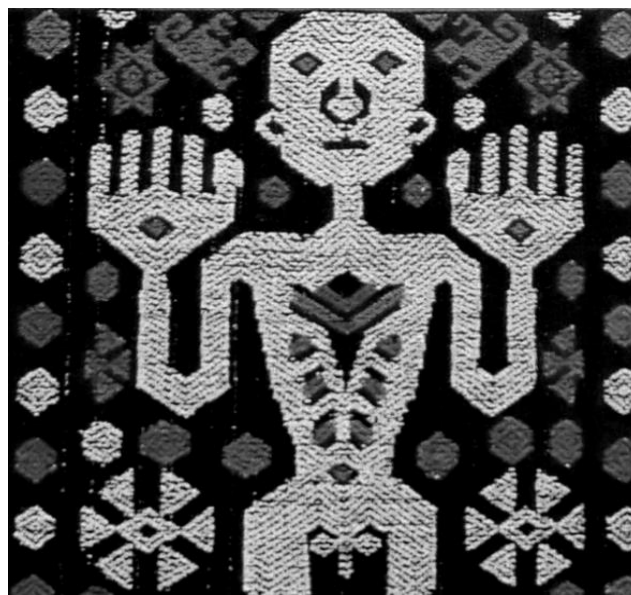


Fig 4. Ana Tau. Image of a naked Sumbanese man with stretched arms.

Samadhi

Samadhi is one of the sacred traditions of the Rato before ceremonies that determines the lives of many people. For example, before the election Rato, construction of *Umma Kalada*, *Wanno Kalada*, *Pasola*, *Wulla Poddu*, *Purung Taliang Marapu*, *Tau Mawo*, and several sacred rituals. The goal is to seek harmony of the feelings, thoughts and souls, thoughts and soul of the Creator who is believed to be *Mawulu Tau* (in Sumba language: Creator of Man) which is called with various metaphors: *Belleka Katillu – Kalada Mata // Dapa Teki Ngara – Dapa Zuma Tamo* (in Sumba Wewewa language: Yang Bertelinga-lebar – Bermata Besar // Yang tidak bisa disebutkan namanya, *Who cannot be named – Yang gelarnya tidak bisa disebutkan sembarangan.*) The Samadhi of the Ratos is a spiritual act which flows in harmony with the daily practices of Marapu residents who are loyal to the teachings of the ancestors who are remembered as *Lara Li Pali – Inu Li Pa Mane* (Sumbanese language *Loura*: The Road Traveled – The Footsteps Treaded).

The traces of ancestors were intimately expressed by the Mar-pu people in their daily lives. It is usually revealed in a woman’s rituals when starting to prepare the weaving place, mixing colour and dyeing of woven yarn; when a father carves or sculpts spiritual stories and cultural symbols on grave stones or pillars

House; or also when a farmer selects seeds to offer, save and then taken again for planting. Several Rato Marapu revealed that the samadhi process is also a process of conversion, whether it is a conversion of ways of thinking and personal spiritual repentance, or also social repentance related to many people.

These samadhi processes are therefore rich in the sayings '*Lara Ina – Lara Ama*' (Mother's Way – Father's Way), which later became widely used in traditional ceremonies.

From the perspective of *Lara Ina – Lara Ama*, the ancestors of Humba, the Rato, *Wunang*, and generations of the Marapu community are trying to tell stories, dialogue, prayers, and at the same time invite anyone to look beyond contemporary boundaries. This process is also a process of contemplation beyond the boundaries of exclusivism, primordialism, eligion, ethnicity, and other boundaries that tend to be rigid in the forms of rituals, oaths, and ancient agreements.

The Samadhi of the Rato Marapu are the primordial space and time of Humba. This holistic-integrative relationship exists between context and text. This principle is reflected in social initiative dialogue (*bale-bale* discussion), ideas about tolerance or communication inter-faith, intercultural learning, and so on. The constructive and prospective dialogue shared by Rato, traditional elders, and *Wunang* is characterised by a vision of creating independent spaces and time for mutual respect, cherish, protect, sustain, and create new spaces together. The Rato or whoever is in a state of neglect will not force to persist in it samadhi; or vice versa, samadhi can be used as a way for reconciliation and means of personal conversion.

The intersection between the praxis of samadhi consciousness is a means of personal self-purification for a Rato Marapu, and at the same time takes part in the depth of the intention of purification and social restructuring. Rato Marapu's samadhi strengthens Marapu's ethical roots, and is even capable beyond the boundaries of Marapu religious experience.

3.3 Ethnicity, Identity and the Problem in Indonesia as Post Colonial Country

The concept of ethnicity is closely related to identity. Sumba people have three things related to their cultural identity: order based on religious beliefs (*Marapu*), order based on place of residence (*Paraingu*), and order based on family ties (*Kabihu*). *Marapu* devotees worship God through an intermediary ancestral spirit. In their worship, they perform *Siri Lattu* rituals regularly, ceremonies carried out before the planting season and after harvest. The planting season requires good results, and the harvest is an expression of gratitude. Apart from these rituals, there are wedding ceremonies, births, and deaths.

Marapu identity is sometimes used as a tool for mobilisation and negotiation in Indonesia, particularly when political interests are at play. This instrumental and pragmatic utilisation of identity reflects the impact of postcolonial perspectives in modern society. The potential inherent within the *Marapu* community, including the local wisdom highlighted earlier, for example, is crucial when addressing climate-related crises. Latour (2018) highlighted this instrumentalist purpose as local wisdom originating from the community that was previously subjected to colonisation.

The ethnicity and identity embodied in indigenous people, as stated above, are exploited and oppressed by some parties. Oppression can sometimes give rise to struggles and strengthen communalism. This is important in the Indonesian context because the value of indigeneity was sedimented in the national imaginary as articulating demands.

From the post-colonial perspective, the emergence of national states in Southeast Asia, occurring almost concurrently, reflects a historical trajectory deeply influenced by the aftermath of colonial rule. The rise of these nation-states was propelled by the prevailing force of nationalism, which sought to reclaim cultural identity and assert independence following colonial domination. This process of nation-building in Indonesia reflects similar movements worldwide, where nationalism has gained prominence in response to colonial legacies, emphasising the quest for autonomy, self-determination, and cultural reclamation in the post-colonial era (Kartodirdjo, 1962).

In Indonesia, the post-colonial legacy cannot be seen only in Marapu cases. The quest for autonomy and self-determination as the effect of exploitation and oppression by the central government can be traced in the cases of Papua and Aceh. As we can trace in history, various institutional frameworks with indigenous beliefs in *adat* communities are accommodated by the state and elucidate non-state institutionalisation (Kusumaryati, 2020). Kusumaryati (2018) showed that Papuans experienced state violence through Indonesian models of development, transnational mining operations, and transmigration programs, which impacted Papuans' economic marginalisation. This phenomenon is reflective of Indonesian cultural domination as an effect of the post-colonial perspective.

Another problem in a post-colonial country is that elites and local leaders in indigenous society sometimes seek their political and commercial interests, as portrayed by Bourchier (2007). In Indonesia, indigenous leaders have become 'old guards' in the New Order that can act as political entrepreneurs,

military commanders, and enforcers. When we discuss identity, it is sometimes related to the creation of “threatening” indigenous beliefs. We cannot assume that it will be harmonious in reality.

In response to such challenges, Pancasila, as Indonesia’s official ideology, holds the potential to address these issues primarily at the normative level. Pancasila’s articulation signifies a collective aspiration to safeguard social order from external disruptions, particularly those associated with formal religion. This appears to be a rejection of external influences, simplifying itself in the pursuit of the common good. However, it is important to note that this potential lies primarily in the realm of ideals.

The post-reformasi era, characterised by a focus on democratic values, provides a unique opportunity to re-evaluate the role of Pancasila in addressing these complexities. While Pancasila has historically sought to insulate social order, the democratic ethos of the post-reformasi period encourages a more open approach. In this context, there is an opportunity to consider exposing Pancasila to diverse perspectives and interruptions that may not be easily assimilated. This shift could foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of Pancasila, allowing it to adapt to the evolving socio-political landscape and contribute to a more resilient and harmonious society.

4 Conclusion

There is much valuable local wisdom born from the Marapu community. This concept is important for maintaining unity, integrity, solidarity, equality, and the dignity of humans and nature. Indigenous religion in Indonesia is autonomous and has its own authority; therefore, sometimes, it is not open to criticism from outside the scope of its environment. Also, in the reality, the indigenous people is seldom conform the images of harmonious society. Most indigenous people who hold indigenous religions are stratified and consist of diverse groups that have conflicting interests. This can be seen as a critic of the indigenous belief in Indonesia.

Marapu, as one of the many non-religious belief systems in Indonesia, in practice, raises issues in the form of not being recognised in religious identity. This creates internal problems for the administration and state data collection in Indonesia. The government hopes that indigenous communities will maintain traditions for the benefit of tourism (economic interest). They see indigenous communities as people who live in particular geographical areas that have their own value systems, such as economic, political, sociocultural institutions, and law. This self-identification by the government, recognised through local regulation (Peraturan Daerah), is can be seen as a colonial legacy and in accordance with a pragmatic point of view of indigenous religion. This pragmatic purpose can hinder other problems, such as the unbalanced relationship with formal religion and conflicts among the people that impact the problems of nationalism.

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