

ECOLOGY, RELIGION, AND ENVIRONMENT: SAMBORI INDIGENOUS RELIGION'S PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS NATURE AND CONSERVATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aimed to examine cosmological aspects in Sambori indigenous community perspectives towards nature and conservations in which the inter-subjective relational relationship between human beings and non-humans becoming the primary resource to protect the environment and the surrounding area in Sambori indigenous community, particularly with their respective sacred land, wellspring, and forest. This study employed a qualitative approach in which the primary resources were literature studies and internet observations; the data were then descriptively and qualitatively described. This study found that the inter-subjective relational relationship between the Sambori indigenous people and non-humans lying in their daily lives and rituals is mainly related to their primary source of livelihood, which relies on natural resources. They believed their surrounding area had sacred sites where the *Holy Being*, locally known as *Parafu*, and the other respected ancestral spirit resided. Therefore, they firmly believe that natural resources, including land, water, forest, and so forth, cannot be separated from their everyday life. They have a unique way of understanding and engaging with their natural resource. This perspective proposes mutual, ethical, and responsible commitment between a human being and the other. Some spiritual ceremonies are performed, such as *Pamali Manggodo* and *Balaleha Music Art*, as a means to engage, interact and connect to the Holy beings to ask for help, safety, and peaceful life, as well as to refuse reinforcements, particularly for their agricultural activities.

Keywords: ecology, religion, environment, indigenous community, Sambori

INTRODUCTION

Instead of a large number of historical, anthropological, and political discourses over indigenous religions in Indonesia, the traditional practices of the indigenous communities have been widely known as spiritual practices that contain religious dimensions in the indigenous religion paradigm. In a recent study, an Indonesian scholar of religious studies, Samsul Maarif, brings up a new paradigm of indigenous communities to reconstruct the definition of religions and proposes a state recognition of indigenous communities as recognized religions in Indonesia. He problematized the categorizations of indigenous communities' practices as a primitive tradition continuously perpetuated by the state, religious authorities, and academia. (Maarif, 2017, Maarif, 2012). It can be seen through indigenous communities'

categories, which are identified as *adat*, culture, and local traditions that opposed the religious category in the Indonesian context (Davidson & Henley, 2007; Tyson, 2010; Rachman, 2011; Ramstedt, 2004, p.17). In the political arena at the beginning of the independence of Indonesia, the non-religious dimensions of traditional practices in the indigenous communities were used as a means to legitimize the power of state official religions to control the local communities in society (Michael Picard & Madinier, 2011; Ropi, 2017).

In the historical and political context, the definition of religion in Indonesia has been strongly influenced by the western culture category and widely shared with the general society (Asad, 1993; Masuzawa, 2005; Smith, 1962). Consequently, the discourse of the categorization of religion has historically and politically contributed to the marginalization of religious dimensions of traditional practices of indigenous communities in Indonesia.

The indigenous communities were increasingly substantially marginalized in line with the dominant religions' power in Indonesia's early independence. The categorization of religion at the time was based on a theological sense of religion that significantly made Islam and Christianity the general category of religious standards (Maarif, 2017, p.32). Those who have not in line with the qualifications to the standards of religions were categorized as syncretism, paganism, animist beliefs, *masyarakat adat*, culture, *adat* law, and so forth (Henley & Davidson, 2007, p.10; Simarmata & Steni, 2017; Mikiro Zitukawa and Michael York, 2008).

As a result, the purification movement quickly flourished in society due to the coming of Islamic organizations. Religions at this time began to be discussed, particularly in some Indonesian constitutional literature, and became a national issue. The discourses of the indigenous communities were then less popular than the point of religion.

In the post-colonial period and new order era, various policies were issued toward the idea of modern Indonesia, where people are differentiated based on their religious identity to give a clear distinction between religion and *kepercayaan* (belief). In this phase, the indigenous communities had a new hope for state recognition due to the category of *masyarakat adat* as a synonymous term with *kepercayaan* (belief). However, in social practices, the indigenous communities became more marginalized. They were discriminated against by the dominant power and religious authority due to the identification of non-religious affiliation or “*lack of religion*” stigmatizations over the indigenous communities, which was strengthened and produced by the religious and academic circles (Geertz, 1976; Hefner, 1990, 2011; Ricklefs, 2012).

Despite all the discourses over indigenous religion that tended to be recognized as a local tradition, syncretism, paganism, animist belief, *masyarakat adat*, the initial characteristics of anthropological accounts on local rules, including all aspects of their

everyday life show the religious and spiritual dimension of their traditional practices (Maarif, 2019; Rachman, 2011).

Theoretically, several academic works can be considered as the framework to examine the indigenous religious perspectives related to the spiritual and religious dimensions of their traditional practices. Firstly, the theory of animism paradigm, which conceptualized the relationship between human and non-human beings, including natural resources: land, water, mountain, forest, and animals as hierarchical systems extending beyond the human being proposed by Bird-David have changed the perspective in looking at the traditional practices of the indigenous communities. In his seminal works on “Animism Revisited,” Bird-David comes up with the personhood paradigm and revisits the interpretation of the animism concept in E.B. Taylor’s perspective to explain the relationship of human and non-human beings as a non-limited relationship (Bird-David, 1999, p.68). He problematized the concept of animism proposed by Tylorian in which animism is viewed as a delusion, and he confidently argued that Tylor read the indigenous religion perspective just based on the modernist spiritualist understanding, not based on the local indigenous communities’ views (Bird-David, 1999, p.69).

Secondly, the discourse of the indigenous religion paradigm proposed by Samsul Maarif comes up with and covers the broader concept of religions that try to reconstruct the world religion paradigm to better understand the indigenous religion perspectives to their respective traditional practices because he argues that religion (*agama*), belief (*kepercayaan*), customs (*adat*), and culture (*kebudayaan*) are socially politically constructed to legitimize the power of the dominant religion in Indonesia. Maarif proposes the concept of the inter-subjective relationship between human and non-human beings to define how human and non-human actors are related through the lens of inter-subjective relational relationships. The interactions between humans and their cosmological environment, including water, mountain, forest, animals, and so forth, are not seen as the relation of subject and object where humans are considered the dominant power over the non-human being. Still, they have mutual, ethical, and responsible relations as a single unity.

Based on those frameworks, it can be considered that the indigenous people have a distinctive perception to view their sacred sites. They perceive the environment and natural resources, including nature and animals, as more than just property or an object; they are viewed as holy sites as living beings that should be considered subjects. Therefore, they can be assumed to have a relational epistemological and cosmological relationship as the independent subjects between human and non-human beings, including the living and the dead, and other beings: the land, mountain, forest, animals, and invisible beings: gods and spirits. Maarif argues that religion covers all forms of daily life and practice, including politics, economics, agriculture, rituals, and so on (Maarif, 2012). Therefore, it can be concluded that indigenous religions with

their respective sacred sites and practices can be identified as a religion because it is continuously practiced with full awareness in society. Besides, when the communities have a relationship with their sacred sites, various rituals and religious practices will be carried out to their respective traditional methods to relate and interact with such places. Living alongside the “others,” inanimate and superpower, encourage them to share the space and responsibly engage to maintain the sacredness of their environmental life.

Furthermore, in the indigenous religion paradigm, being religious engages in inter-subjective relations. Therefore, each person commits and carries out responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity. In an inter-subjective relationship, responsibility means “what I do would affect me.” While ethics implies “what I do would affect others,” reciprocity indicates “what I give is what I take, or what I take is what I give.” Maarif concluded that those three principles of inter-subjective relationship are religious principles in the indigenous religion paradigm. This is an appropriate framework for the religious practices of indigenous communities in Indonesia (Maarif, 2019).

Several research has been conducted to understand the inter-subjective relationship between human and non-human beings, such as the study of Ammatoa indigenous communities in South Sulawesi. They believed in their ancestors and performed rituals related to their sacred land to protect their forest and environment (Maarif, 2012). The same belief can be found in Orang Rimba (People of the forest) in Jambi and South Sumatra, who depends on their livelihood in the forest, particularly for annual fruit seasons. Forest is a sacred site for them where some ceremonies are annually conducted related to their yearly fruit seasons, particularly for the preceding period of planting seasons (Sagar, 2008). Similar rituals are also performed by Marapu indigenous communities in East Nusa Tenggara. They perform spiritual ceremonies to their ancestors to please them and prevent them from being angry because they believe their ancestors are around them daily (Fowler, 2003). Also, the beliefs of personhood upheld by the Aboriginal indigenous communities in Australia show that the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated (Vicki Grieves, 2008). Therefore, it can be concluded that indigenous communities believed in non-human beings because non-living beings (visible and invisible) are part of their life that has mutual relation as subject versus subject.

In short, this paper will propose the other indigenous communities in Eastern Sumbawa Island, known as Sambori. This community has a distinctive way of agricultural activity, which is strongly influenced by their respected belief in nature, environment, land, and forest. The inter-subjective relationships between human beings and other beings are continuously practiced today. It can be seen from how they

protect their sacred sites and perform spiritual ceremonies related to their holy being and ancestor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sambori is the territory's name and the indigenous communities living in the eastern Lambitu mountain forest, Sumbawa Island. Sambori has two villages, namely, inner and outer villages. The inner village or the old village of Sambori indigenous communities (Kampung Sambori Lama) is only inhabited by the native Sambori communities. In contrast, the outer village or new village of Sambori (Kampung Sambori Baru) is inhabited by some indigenous people and immigrants who are married to the native Sambori communities (Dinas Pariwisata Kabupaten Bima, 2020). This village is located at an altitude of around 800 meters above sea level on the hills and the slopes of Lambitu Mount. Hence, the location of this village is higher than the other village in Bima, and it consequently makes their dependency on natural resources for their livelihood, including the roots of their cosmological beliefs towards the existence of non-human beings in their surrounding environment that protect their land, water, and forest.

The relationship of Sambori indigenous communities with their sacred land is based on their traditional beliefs. They view the land, mountain, forest, and natural resources, including water and animals, as a single unity as a living being. Maarif calls this relationship an inter-subjectivity relationship (Maarif, 2019). From the Sambori perspective, they believe that certain land has a sacred site that is guarded by Holy beings in the Sambori local language known as Parafu, who was thought as tribal descendants of Sambori that should be treated through traditional rituals such as Pamali Manggodo and traditional music arts Belaleha as a means to interact and relate with the holy beings. The following paragraph will propose the concept of Parafu, or Holy beings, and Pamali Manggodo, including the Belaleha song as a means of spiritual practices as well as its relation to the efforts of Sambori communities to maintain their natural resource and environmental life.

Holy Beings, Parafu: The Guardians of Sacred Land

Although most Sambori communities are Muslim, they consider themselves indigenous and still uphold their traditional practices and beliefs. They believe that the land and surrounding area of Lambitu mountain have a sacred site where the holy beings or Parafu live. In the theory of The Universal Code of Conduct on Holy Sites (UCCHS), it is clearly stated that what means by the Holy sites are understood as places of religious significance to particular religious communities. They include but are not limited to places of worship, cemeteries, and shrines, incorporating their immediate surroundings when these form an integral part of the site (Suhadi, 2016). In Sambori indigenous communities, Parafu was believed as tribal descendants of the

Sambori ethnic and were considered to live around them to maintain their land and environment. Therefore, the offering practice “Sesajen” in this area is commonly found to treat the Parafu or holy beings to give them (Sambori communities) peaceful and safe life.

They believe that Parafu has the power to control social and environmental life and resides in certain sacred places such as mountains, shady trees, large rocks, wellspring, and supernatural things like choppers. To interact and connect to the Parafu, Sambori communities pointed to a respective leader, known as Ncuhi, elder people to communicate and lead the spiritual rituals and offering practices. This offering practice was generally known as Toho Dore, or animal slaughter (Nurnazmi et al., 2020)

In addition, they also believe that the spirits of the ancestors who have died, especially the spirits of those whom they think have respected during their lives, such as Ncuhi, still have a role and control over their lives and daily life. They believe that the spirits and souls of the ancestor have lived with Parafu in certain places. Sambori indigenous people also have spiritual traditions through rituals to honor ancestral spirits holding worship ceremonies at certain times. The ceremony was accompanied by offerings and sacrifices of livestock led by Ncuhi. These places of worship are commonly known as Parafu Ra Pamboro, located in sacred sites such as wellsprings, trees, and forests (Saidin Hamzah et al., 2017; Fahrurizki, 2015; PDAM Tirta Benteng, 2018).

The understanding of Holy spirits, Parafu, and the spirits of the ancestor in Sambori communities implies that their understanding of their land is not just non-human beings. Still, it represents the “other” beings with an inter-subjective relationship between a living being and a non-living being. In this case, the function of ritual lies in the relationship between humans and the invisible life around their lives. The ceremony becomes a mechanism of interaction that unites the communities in an institutionalized system of action. Therefore, Durkheim considers spiritual traditions to strengthen collective feelings, social integration, and cohesion (Durkheim, 1912).

Sambori Indigenous cases can be seen from how they respond to ecological phenomena such as drought and natural disasters. In responding to this ecological difficulty, Sambori people see that whatever tragedy befalls their life, they accept it with resignation. They view it as a punishment from Parafu (their ancestor’s spirits) for their wrong attitudes toward the natural resources surrounding them. However, they also enjoy the disaster from Parafu as a superpower to control the area over the nature they inhabit by performing traditional ceremonies that require animal sacrifices in the local language known as “Toho Dore,” followed by some traditions such as du’a and mantra. The Sambori people see ecological problems regarding survival in their dependency on nature and the surrounding environmental life. They worry about

severe problems behind natural disasters, such as famine, rather than ecological phenomena such as natural disasters, which in their perspective, are a form of punishment and anger of Parafu towards their attitudes.

Religious Ceremony in Agricultural commodities and environmental life of Sambori indigenous communities

The spiritual practices conducted by the Sambori communities have been in line with the mutual relationship between human beings and non-human beings, particularly natural resources and conservation. In Sambori indigenous case, their daily needs are highly dependent on natural resources in the entire area and surrounding environment of Lambitu Mount. The local people who live around the mount utilize natural resources from the mountain and forest to fulfill their daily needs and family earnings (Nurhasanah, 2016; Rijal, 2016; Junaidin et al., 2019). Thus, In general, the livelihoods of Sambori communities are still classified as traditional, focused on rural farming and conventional agricultural activity, and are highly dependent on natural resources such as mountains and forests. However, to maintain their sacred land, the utilization of the natural resources is regulated based on the traditional rules and customary leader accompanied by the village head of the local communities through a meeting (mbolo weki, musyawarah). This ethnological utilization is also regulated to limit the paddy fields ownership in which they rotate the ownership of the fields annually alternately from one to another family member, from one season to the next harvesting season, unceasingly from year to year. The rotation system runs from the first offspring layer of the family (Junaidin et al., 2019, p. 1623).

The Sambori people named the paddy fields a term of Bangga. The Bangga in Sambori communities is widely used for farming rice in the rainy season because it is a rainfed area. In addition, some terms similar to Bangga are So and Oma (moorland). The opened Bangga field must be an area that is close to the river or water resources to facilitate the irrigation process. In the dry season, Bangga areas are usually planted with secondary crops such as palawija, pumpkins, garlic, and other productive plants (Zulharman et al., 2017).

Junaidin et al. (2019) explained that the process of opening an Oma (moorland) is initially done in groups, preceded by the activity of Ma'a (clearing the land of the former vegetation), Hui karaso (cleaning the bush and weeds), Kuta (fencing), and Ngguda or mentie (planting). To facilitate the management system, the people fence off their oma with a pile of stones and mark it. Before planning to open oma, they initially have to ask Ncuhi (The Ancestor spirits) for permission. After that, they will gather with the customary figures to plan the traditional ritual of Weha Oha Dana or Wea Oha Oma to prevent their field crops from the plague or pest attacks. They jointly have to collect seeds to be distributed after the traditional ritual is finished. Afterward, the elders will start planting crops in the fields.

This strategy of the territorial divisions and traditional practices is related to preserving their environment and other beings (land, water, forest, and mountain) in Sambori communities. If seen from the indigenous religious paradigm, preserving paddy fields ownerships, including their spiritual ceremonies and everyday rituals regarding their agricultural life, may be identified as religious practices which align with the indigenous religious paradigm proposed by Samsul Maarif (2019).

Due to their dependency on natural resources, certain rituals are performed as a form of appreciation and respect for the guardians of their land and forests; those ceremonies are done before starting agricultural activities and commodities, as well as after the harvesting period. Those activities show that they account for and depend on nature which has given them life. There are at least two religious traditions related to their sacred land utilization and conservation in Sambori indigenous communities: Pamali Manggodo and Belaleha music art.

The Pamali Manggodo ceremony is generally performed as an important event in the life of the Sambori people. Still, because their livelihood, in general, is farming, the Pamali Manggodo ceremony is often found in agricultural activities. The tradition is carried out before opening the field, and directly on the land to be opened with hopes that their field crops are not attacked by the plague, such as caterpillars, rats, birds, pigs, and so on. At the start of the planting season, the Sambori communities visit Holy beings, Parafu, and their respected ancestor to ask for permission to carry out activities in the fields. At harvest time, they perform a Pamali Manggodo ceremony as an expression of gratitude for their harvest. In its implementation, the Pamali Manggodo ceremony is led by a traditional figure and attended by several traditional leaders who had their respective duties to conduct the ceremony of rejecting reinforcements (Junaidin et al., 2019).

The community place the Pamali Manggodo ceremony in a high position for the sustainability of their livelihood. The danger of vulnerability in their agricultural system makes them afraid to ignore the rules that apply during the ceremony and customary law. The Pamali Manggodo ceremony is also based on beliefs essential to creating social solidarity. The general function of religion is believed to lie in its ability to build solidarity and a sense of togetherness and legitimize differences in power (Eriksen, 2009:126). In Sambori indigenous case, their agricultural activity is taken up communally, beginning with the preparation of the soil, followed by the sowing of crops, land maintenance, and cultivation, to the point of harvest. This local tradition knowledge creates units of environment and activities of community production, including forests, paddy fields, yards, moors, swamps, ponds, and rivers (Junaidin et al., 2019).

The reciprocal relationship between society (humans) and nature (non-human beings) has implications for harmonization between human beings and other beings. By maintaining this relationship, they feel saved from various disasters that can

threaten the safety of the environment and their safety. In Maarif's perspective, this relational relationship encourages society to commit and carry out the responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity to mutually engage and relate to other beings (Maarif, 2019). In Ma'arif's language, that responsibility means "what I do would affect me." While ethics implies "what I do would affect others," and reciprocity indicates "what I give is what I take, or what I take is what I give" (Maarif, 2019). This attitude leads the indigenous communities, including the Sambori Indigenous group, to take responsibility for preserving their natural resources: land, water, and forest.

Despite the offering ritual, another thing found in the process of the Pamali Manggodo ceremony is Balaleha music art. The element of art can be seen in the chanting of Belaleha poetry. Belaleha is the oldest vocal music artist. This verbal art contains prayers and hopes so that the land, state, family, and society will always receive protection from the Holy beings and stay away from disasters. Belaleha's vocal strains are generally sung at circumcision events and weddings. Therefore, the Sambori people commonly called it Belaleha Suna Ro Ndoso (Circumcision) and Belaleha Nika Ro Neku (Marriage). Belaleha poetry contains advice, rhymes, praise, and hopes for the Almighty through singing together (Malingi, 2012).

The verse of the Belaleha song has a high social function and gives the feeling of spiritual power. Those song lyrics deeply influence the communities, especially for older people who have long experienced and felt the nuances that existed during the ceremony. These feelings increase along with the spiritual reality that they perceive in their everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Inter-subjective relational relationships between Sambori indigenous communities and non-human beings, particularly with the sacred land, water, forest, and so forth, are closely related to their dependent life and livelihoods over natural resources. They believed their surrounding area had sacred sites where the Holy being, locally known as Parafu, resided. Some spiritual ceremonies are performed, like Pamali Manggodo and Balaleha Music Art, to engage and connect to the Holy beings to ask for help, safety, and peaceful life, as well as refuse reinforcements, particularly for their agricultural activities. In addition, their rituals represent their belief in the importance of natural resources and ecological aspects in their surrounding area as the other living beings.

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