

# The Encounter between Indigenous Religions, World Religions and Modernity

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses how Ammatoans, an indigenous people of Sulawesi, embrace Islam, adjust their life with modernity, and at the same time preserve their indigenous religion. It specifically talks about the practice of Ramadan through which those three elements are articulated by Ammatoans. Building insight on Stuart Hall's theory of "articulation," this paper argues that those three elements are contextually exercised, advocated, challenged, and questioned, and even "humiliated" by Ammatoans. It shows that Ammatoans, with their own ways, exercise Islam and modernity as much as their indigenous religion. The three elements, for Ammatoans, are not mutually exclusive. They are dialectical as they are practiced by Ammatoans.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Religions, Modernity, Ammatoans, Exclusive, Humiliation*

## Introduction

The Ammatoans, whose indigenous religion is examined in this paper, live in the village of Tanah Toa, Bulukumba, South Sulawesi, Indonesia. For the Indonesian state, especially during the New Order regime (1965--1998), the Ammatoans are 'estranged people', and so targets of the state's modernizing programs of development through resettlement, the establishment of schools, clinics, electricity, asphalted roads, and so forth.<sup>1</sup> 'Estranged peoples' of Indonesia

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<sup>1</sup>Michael van Langenberg, "The New Order State: Language, Ideology, Hegemony", In *State and civil society in Indonesia*, ed. A Budiman (Victoria: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University Clayton,

like the Ammatoans need to be reordered and modernized, and being modern is to hold the national identity: modern, progressive, technologically advanced, and so to alter their traditions, indigenous religions.<sup>2</sup> In addition, these indigenous people have encountered the world religion of Islam since the seventeenth century. In recent years Islamization has been intensified by Muslim groups in this community. Modernity and Islam have been seen to be dominating the Ammatoa's indigenous religion, and cause the fading away of the indigenous religions,<sup>3</sup> but this paper shows in contrast that Ammatoans have actively transformed their indigenous religion by articulating it in response to modernity and Islam. To elaborate the articulation, I focus on the practice of Ramadan, the ninth month in Islamic calendar, and also called the month of fasting, which is the fourth pillar of Islam, through which the Ammatoa's indigenous religion, Islam and modernity are articulated by Ammatoans.

The long and intensive interactions between the Ammatoa's indigenous religion, Islam, and modernity have produced different attitudes and responses among Ammatoans. Many of them are conservative of, but some are humiliating the indigenous religion. Ammatoans involved in collective rituals such as initiations, weddings, funerals, and the practice of Ramadan are not only those who are conservative but also those who are keen in 'humiliating' their indigenous religion.

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1990), Tania Murray Li, "Compromising Power: Development, Culture, and Rule in Indonesia," in *Cultural Anthropology* 14 (1999): 295--322.

<sup>2</sup>J. M. Atkinson, "Religions in Dialogue: The Construction of an Indonesian Minority Religion," *American Ethnologist* 10 (1983): 688, A. L. Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the Way Place* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), Li, "Compromising Power," 299.

<sup>3</sup>Samiang Katu, *Pasang ri Kajang Kajian: Tentang Akomodasi Islam dengan Budaya Lokal di Sulawesi* (Makkassar: IAIN Alauddin Makassar, 2000), Kma. M. Usop, *Pasang ri Kajang: Kajian Sistem Nilai di 'Benteng Hitam' Amma Toa* (Ujung Pandang: Pusat Latihan Penelitian Ilmu-Ilmu Sosial, UNHAS, 1978).

Such 'humiliation' is illustrated in one of my field notes taken in September 2009 as follows:

At the first night of Ramadan in 2009, there were only three people performed the *taraweh* prayers: me and two Ammatoans. *Taraweh* is the night prayers of Ramadan observed by Muslims. Realizing that I was a non-Ammataon, one of them came and told me, 'At the first night of Ramadan, everyone is busy with *baca-doang*<sup>4</sup> and food. People in this community are still strongly attached to indigenous religion. They profess to be Muslim, but they are not willing to detach their indigenous religion. What it means to be Muslim, if you don't give up with your old religion? No point of being Muslim if you keep your old religion. It's better you say that you are not Muslim if your indigenous religion is what concerns you the most. Otherwise, you are hypocrite'.

He went on saying, 'I was born and grew up with this community, but I do not follow the old religion any longer. For me, the religion is wrong, and practicing it would make my Islam invalid. Once I proclaim I am Muslim, I only practice Islam: nothing else, no old religion for sure'.

Some Ammatoans thought of the performance of an extensive ritual called *akkatterek* (cutting hair, a kind of initiation ritual) which requires at least one water buffalo as either a burden to be avoided or simply a waste of money. For them, such a practice shows that the practitioners are 'backward' and 'primitive.' They burden themselves by

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<sup>4</sup>*Baca doang* literally means recitation of prayers. For this literal meaning, anyone who recites prayers, like mantra, s/he performs *baca doang*. All rituals of the Ammatoa involve *baca doang*. It is also used to name certain rituals like those of welcoming Ramadan. *Baca doang* is interchangeably used with *baca-baca*. People usually called *baca doang* for the ones performed by an imam, and *baca baca* for the ones observed by a *sanro* (traditional specialist).

preserving the indigenous religion. They argued that the exorbitant amount of money spent on *akaterrek* is wasteful and 'stupid.' One of them commented:

Many of them (the conservative Ammatoans) are potentially wealthy, especially after their harvest. They remain poor because they do not know how to save their money. What they like to do is to waste their money on stupid feasts. They want to be known as rich by sponsoring expensive feasts. But the fact is that after they perform the feasts, they have nothing left. They waste all their money. If they want to be known as rich, they should have saved their money and used it to build a good house. They should have bought things like televisions, sofa, and so forth. That is how they should have perceived of being rich. They spend tens of millions Rupiahs for a feast, but wear no sandals, have no clothes, and live in a hut. Isn't that stupid?

Such 'humiliations' toward the Ammatoan indigenous religion are not rare among Ammatoans. It is not even unpublic. In sermons given in every Friday prayer and during the nights of Ramadan, such 'humiliation' was often found. Despite their 'humiliation,' they attended and were involved in the Ammatoa's indigenous rituals, and so practicing the indigenous religion. Being curious about their participation in rituals, I approached one of those who usually humiliated indigenous religion at a ritual event. Without having my questions, the person said, 'Look what they are doing! Is there anything that makes sense to you? What are they doing to the leaves, fruits, and cakes? What are all of that for? Did the prophet ever do such things? Never! These are really against Islam.' When asked about reasons for his attendance and participation, he said in reply, 'I come because they invited me. I feel bad if I don't come.' He then told me not to talk about what he said to me to anyone, and then laughed.

The point here is that the engagement of the people in ritual practices is what Stuart Hall explains about the articulation between ideology and social forces.<sup>5</sup> The encounter between the Ammatoan indigenous religion, Islam, and later on nationality could then be seen through Hall's theory of articulation. Hall explains the theory as:

Both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects.<sup>6</sup>

He also defines articulation as:

The form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances *can* a connection be forged or made?<sup>7</sup>

Based on Hall's theory, it makes sense that 'humiliation' toward the indigenous religion was not uncommon during Ramadan through sermons because it was already within a discourse of Islam vis a vis indigenous religion. The discourse had been already familiar to those who were at the mosque. Time, space, and place were conditional connection for the discourse being articulated. Although with the same people, the discourse was often challenged and not articulated. The subjects were not able to articulate the discourse all the time. They had to negotiate their ideology in every moment for articulation.

The practice of Ramadan illustrates similar thing. The Ammatoans perceived the practice as one of their ways of exercising Islam. Ramadan for Ammatoans is very special. It is

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<sup>5</sup>L. Grossberg, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10 (1986): 45-60.

<sup>6</sup>Grossberg, "On Postmodernism," 53

<sup>7</sup>Grossberg, "On Postmodernism," 53

in this month the dead people come back to their graves. People are not sure where the dead people live but at Ramadan, especially a week before *idul fitr* (the festival concluding the fasting at the end of Ramadan), they are at their graves. It is the time people could meet their dead families and relatives. Ramadan is special because people fast, and the fasting will be as their *bokong* (supplies) to the hereafter. Moreover, it is the moment Ammatoans, like other Muslims, practically engage in humanitarian acts: everyone offers almsgiving to the needy.

The discourse of Ramadan that has been popular, however it came through, already comes to the minds of the Ammatoans. It is already a part of their consciousness. Through that consciousness the people have constructed narratives in relation to it to connect their indigenous religion and Islam.<sup>8</sup> Some might find the above narration of Ramadan to be impoverished and impure, but that is how articulation works for Hall. For a more extreme example, Hall explains that Rastafarians of Jamaica borrowed a text from the Bible, Rasta, turned it upside down, and gave meaning to it that met their dues and experiences.<sup>9</sup> Such experiences were shared by Ammatoans in many occasions, including for instance celebrating Ramadan with karaoke. Hall elucidates this kind of phenomena as the process of cultural transformation. The Ammatoa's narration and practice of Ramadan is not totally new, but it is not a straight, fixed line of continuity from the past.<sup>10</sup> It is the work of articulation.

The practice of Ramadan is a month in duration. Welcoming Ramadan, the people were sponsoring rituals of *baca doang*. They slaughtered chickens and provided traditional meals for the *baca doang*. They waited for their imam to lead *baca doang*. It really took long time for the imam to cover all of them.

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<sup>8</sup>See Grossberg, "On Postmodernism," 54

<sup>9</sup>Grossberg, "On Postmodernism," 54

<sup>10</sup>Grossberg, "On Postmodernism," 54

That was the reason why the mosque in this village was quite as explained above. The main practice during this period of time was *baca-doang* at home. The imam came and performed *baca-doang* in front of meals provided by the host. Afterward, everyone ate. In return, those who received services of the imam brought a package of meals to the imam's house. The meals the imam performed *baca doang* for were perceived to consist of two parts. The first was the inward of the food which was offered to the dead, and second was the outward of it, which was for the living. Being so perceived, *baca doang* and the meals were to connect the dead and the living.

At the first night of Ramadan, the people placed kerosene lights (*sulo*) in front of their houses, including the ones with electricity until they were about to sleep. That was a part of appreciating and welcoming Ramadan. The *sulo* was to show Ramadan the way to the house and that the owners of houses were ready to welcome Ramadan. Electricity as a means for modernity is accepted and valued, but does not wipe out indigenous religious ideas and practices. Not everyone, however, did light *sulo*. One of them said, 'I don't need *sulo* because I already have the electric lamp. It is brighter and so Ramadan should know how to enter my brighter house'. This last case shows that electricity has replaced *sulo*, but again, indigenous ideas of perceiving and practicing Ramadan are still in play. The modern tool is used as a means to transform their indigenous religion.

The fifteenth day of Ramadan marks a point that Ramadan is going. For about fifteen days, starting from the fifteenth to the last day of Ramadan, people again performed *baca doang* for farewell of Ramadan. Some performed *baca doang* during the dinner time, so the meals were for breaking the fast. Some others performed *baca doang* during lunch time, and so those people concluded their fasting of Ramadan. There were other understandings on fasting. Many observed the fasting all

days of the whole month. Some observed it the first ten days of the month, others fasted the first fifteen days, and some others did only three days: the first, the fifteenth, and the last day. There were also who understood that it was only obligated for one of the days of the one third, one of any days of the two third, and one during three third of the month. The other days were mandatory only. Another understanding I heard was that 'You keep fasting until you break it. Once you break it, you stop it. So, if you break the fast in the seventh day, you do not fast for the rest. That is it'. For the people, knowledge about fasting, like many other kinds of knowledge, is an individual pursuit. This fact may be seen as what Hall would say as a result of articulation, but also signifies the idea of pluralism that individuals might and may observe a practice according to their own knowledge. Individuals were stick with their own knowledge and appreciated others'. They did not falsify other individuals' knowledge for they were different. Those differences of observing the fasting were found not only between families, but even within a family.

The twenty third day of Ramadan or a week before *idul fitrh* is called the Day of *abbattasa jerak* (cleaning up the graves). According to the Ammatoa's religious tradition, the Day of *abbattasa jerak* is the day when all the dead come back to their graves. At this day, the Ammatoans, including those staying somewhere outside Tanah Toa, come and clean up their families' and relatives' graves in the village. *Abbattasa jerak* is one of the biggest annual rituals, but this one is without feast. The people poured in graveyards.

A day before religious specialists had actually initiated *abbattasa jerak*. They initiated for the meeting between the living and the dead. At this time, non-specialists were not allowed to come, let alone outsiders. The initiation was meant to open 'the door of the graves' in order for both the dead and the living could meet and interact with each other. The specialists initiated



to make sure that both the dead and the living were prepared for a meeting(s).

At the last day of the month, people woke up very early in the morning to bathe at wells: about 3 am. At the well, a female *sanro* was serving every one. Everyone started with three dippers of water that the *sanro* did *baca-baca* on. As generally understood by Muslims, Ramadan, through this bathing ritual concludes the cleansing of both the outward or physical and inward or spiritual aspects of the human person. At the day of *idul fithr* everyone who practices Ramadan becomes a new person, reborn.

What has been shown so far for the practice of Ramadan is to point out that Islam and modernity are so much exercised as the indigenous religion. The Ammatoans with their own ways in which they rearticulated their indigenous religion valued Ramadan as much as any other Muslims. Hall's theory works very well here that the way people lived their lives is to constantly articulate their 'ideology' throughout their history. Power relation, if Islam, modernity, and indigenous religion are considered to be ideological concept, is dynamic, because concept and history is absolutely dialectical.<sup>11</sup>

It is now to state that Ammatoans showed their enthusiasm to the three elements: indigenous religion, Islam, and modernity. In other words, those three ideologies were all powerful, but all historical. For certain conditions, they were hegemonic, but at other occasions were challenged. The three were all dialectical both to their historical conditions and to each other. Their encounters necessitated articulation, and so were dialectical. It is for such a phenomenon that the Comaroffs argue "real" beginnings and endings are never very neat. Nor is "real" history ever respectful of clean epochal

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<sup>11</sup>Marshal Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

breaks' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997:405).<sup>12</sup> To say the least, the history of the Ammatoa is not finished. It is true that their culture and religion transform, but the direction of the transformation is not clear.

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<sup>12</sup>John Comaroff and Jean L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Volume II (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997).

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