

# RITUAL AS POLITICS: *RAJU* CULTURAL PRACTICE IN PLURAL SOCIETY OF *MBAWA*, WEST NUSA TENGGARA

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## ABSTRACT

Since the New Order government the religious politics has obliged residents to adhere to one of the five official religions, causing the *Mbawa* society to be a plural one. They have welcome Christianity and Islam, but they still maintain their old belief, that is, *Parafu*. Movements have appeared in the society. The people were between peace and conflict. The last movements led to violence, taking place in 1969, 1972, and 2000. The *Raju* cultural practice is maintained within the context of Islamic and Christian contestations, and has been used as the arena of cultural fight. This present study discusses how the *Raju* ritual frees itself and its supporting people from the conflict, and how it is transformed into a means of supervising peace. The perspective of the critical theory was used in the present study to explore the texts of the *Mbawa* society. The discourse analysis was used to guide the discussion. Based on the fieldwork done at Mbawa from 2011 to 2014, several constructions of the *Raju* cultural practices were found. *First*, the *Raju* practice refers to the maintenance of identity and supremacy of the Mbawa society as conserver of the ancestor's tradition; *second*, the *Raju* cultural practice functions as a mechanism of internal solidarity, so horizontal conflict can be avoided; and *third*, the *Raju* cultural practice plays a role as a means of revealing the "resistance" to as well as "acceptance" of the other people's cultural domination. The finding of the study gives better understanding of the tradition-based management of conflict. It is such a character which, to some extent, has caused the *Raju* cultural practice to be the practice of management conflict. The significant cultural position of the Mbawa plural society could be identified from the discursive space and its potential as means of communication.

Keywords: plurality, resistance, accommodation, hegemony, and conflict management.

## INTRODUCTION

This present study focuses on the Mbawa people, a small ethnic group of people with a great issue, who live in the Bima mountainous area, West Nusa Tenggara. They are a plural society and live in contestation of Islam and Christianity. Their fully dynamic life had taken place since the Indonesian modern era, especially the New Order government. Such dynamic lives had changed their cultural structure. The *Mbawa* people (*Dou Mbawa*) who used to adhere to their local belief *Parafu* had converted into Muslims and Christians; some had converted from Christians into Muslims and some

others had also converted from Muslims into Christians. At that time their faith, Parafu, did not die out; even it seemed to be revitalized as an identity. In this case, the lives of the *Dou Mbawa* people became culturally ambiguous and problematic. Their 'pleasantry' lives had changed into a cultural tumult. Religious conflict with violence took place in 1969, 1972, and 2000. So far the *Mbawa* has been used as the arena of cultural fight among the local people (insiders), between the local people (insiders) and outsiders, and among the outsiders. As a tradition-based society, the Dou Mbawa people have found a communal morality-based natural solution (Just, 2001) which is performed through socio-cultural practices (Kadri et al, 2009). The *Raju* cultural practice, for example, was inherited and transformed in a situation and context in which the cultural fight took place. In the *Raju* practice, the planting time which has involved Muslims and Christians and has been rooted from what is believed in Parafu, has been the hegemonic locus and contestation of various segments of society.

This present study reveals the meaning of the *Raju* cultural practice and its aspects for the *Dou Mbawa* (*Mbawa* people) from the multicultural context and the relation of power in which they exist. The *Raju* cultural practice is an accumulation of knowledge and is an access to the exploration of the relation and fight of cultural entities (which are transformed into the local religion) versus religion (the universal religion), causing one to be marginalized and the other to be dominating.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This present study eclectically used the perspective of critical theories to reveal the political action behind the *Raju* cultural practice, and to describe the implicit actors in it. The data were obtained through fieldwork from 2011 to 2014 using the techniques of observation, interview, and documentation. Three texts were obtained; they are the social "text", the physical "text", and the text (without any quotation mark) of the *Kasaro* prayers recited at the peak of the *Raju* celebration. The study was guided by the discourse analysis which allowed the writer to find the 'referential code' which could lead to the cultural meaning of such a cultural practice.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the result of the fieldwork, the writer proposed two arguments. First, the *Raju* cultural practice is an accumulation of knowledge and structural representation and social relation in the *Mbawa* community, as it contains social vision and interest.

Second, the *Raju* cultural practice has been transformed into the strategy of communication, conflict management, and the way of overcoming hegemony. This argument contradicts the socio-religious map of the fully dynamic *Mbawa* community. The society which occupies the area which is located in the western part of the mountainous area of Bima City has been the locus of cultural contestations since the arrival of outsiders especially through the spreading practice of Islam and Christianity. Such two religious strengths entered through self image and the construction of the identity of the *Mbawa* people who are different in regard to their locality, religion and intensity (Hitchcock, 1996), as they live in a mountainous area and adhere to what is referred to as *Parafu*. In addition, their color is different from others'. They are stated to be underdeveloped, 'kafir' (infidel) or 'muryrik' (polytheist), and "the others" in the social relation. Based on that, intervention was introduced to them by the state using the ideology of development in various fields and by the universal religious groups, namely, Muslims and Christians.

If the government (the state) intervenes using the modus of physical and spiritual development, then Muslims and Christians, as the civil societies, strengthens the religious aspect through proselytizing and zending. Initially, the attempt made by the Christian group was more welcome, although Christianization had taken place after Islamization, starting from the sultanate era (Rahman,, 2011). As a consequence, the *Mbawa* people were better known as a Christian community than as the community of the *Parafu* followers. Furthermore, Mbawa was better known as the only center of Christians in the Bima territory which is mostly occupied by Muslims. Recently, reislamization has been more seriously activated to compensate the religious proselytizing and the 'defeat' against Christianity in the past. It is this which has figured the *Mbawa* society where various cultures, ideologies, and interests have fought against one another; therefore, it has been used as the locus of life.

The hegemony in the form of moral and intellectual leadership (Imam, 2010) has taken place in the Mbawa society through the new morality which is in the form of the universal religious teaching to replace the Parafu-based morality. How the Mbawa society has given response to such a new morality contains the 'art of secretly refusing' and the 'art of adapting.

The 'text' or the hidden transcript implies the art of refuting domination (Scott,, 199) as illustrated by the deconstruction of "Pohon Wangi" (indicating the Muslim location) so that a church could be constructed; however, a mosque was constructed

under the shelter of 'Pohon Bau' (the location of non-Muslims). The unification of the Muslim cemetery and Christian cemetery without any partition can be read as the refusal to the spatial separation of the Mbawa community based on the religious separation. There are still many other practices indicating refusal.

The art of accepting can be semiotically read from the appearance of the physical environment of *Uma Ncuhi*, the traditional house which represents the Mbawa people's local culture and identity (Keane, 1995). The introduction of what is locally referred to *sarange* (terrace) as a new element of the *Uma Ncuhi* structure indicates the introduction of the modern element in the *Mbawa* tradition. The upright position of the house of the Bima urban style which is exactly constructed next to the *Uma Ncuhi* and the many Christian instruments it contains also indicate the interference of modernity. As far as the *Raju* cultural practice is concerned, there is a dance which is locally referred to as the *Kalero* dance, which is assumed to adopt the position and movement made by Muslims when they perform their ritual prayers. In the practice of *Dewa*, the therapy which is performed through magic formula (mantra) also looks like what is in Islam referred to as the tradition of *Itikaf*, that is, not moving while reciting the words from al-Quran until a certain atmosphere. What is the most visible is the structure of the Kasaro prayers recited at the peak of the *Raju* celebration. The traditional prayers are mixed with the expressions adopted from the Islamic and Christian traditions.

From what was described above, it can be stated that the *Mbawa* society has a structural strategy as a response to the external challenge, which operates between the bank in which resistance is shown and the bank in which adoption is made. As a cultural flexibility, they make use of the *Raju* cultural practice for managing the interest in the resistance to hegemony and the interest in the agreement with being dominated. In turn, the *Raju* cultural practice surpasses its basic function as a religious natural expression in order to enter the cultural phase of the public space and communication. As far as its last function is concerned, the *Raju* cultural practice functions as a place where various elements of the society get unified again after being trapped in the religious private spaces. They hold a discursive space in the form of "Paresa Rawi Rasa" as a place where and a time when they sit together to solve social problems without any hierarchy. That is the public space according to the Mbawa people; it is place where ideas, aspirations, and communal commitments are shared to form a communicative condition for the society as illustrated by Habermas (Hardiman, 2009).

The prayers and magic formula of Kasaro which are recited at the peak of such a meeting are more than simply religious texts or ritual languages. Kasaro is an 'instrument' for communicating with God and ancestors. It is also advice and reminder to the community and an instrument for speaking out with outsiders. In the Kasaro reading, there is a hierarchical aspect of knowledge which reflects the relation of power and distribution of power. In the Kasaro verses, there is a self identification which shows identity, consolidation of internal strength and 'sign' for outsiders who show politics. Thus, the *Kasaro* text, which is, in accordance with the Mbawa people, an instrument of political communication, is a communicative act.

The *Raju* discourse also produces the ontological knowledge as the basis of the doctrine of the relation among religions. Such ontological knowledge can be seen from the *Paresa Tua* practice, that is, the philosophical discussion among the elders concerning the essence of God, the creation of human beings, religious rituals, and even the origins of religions and their histories. It is this doctrine which serves as the basis of harmonious social relation, and contributes to morality and the norm of social life in Mbawa society.

Such a doctrine, the expression of 'refusing', and the expression of 'adopting', as far as the Mbawa people are concerned, are related to one another. It is this which has led to the accumulation of communal genius whose elements form an instrument used to supervise peace or the internal mechanism of avoiding conflicts among the Mbawa people. To outsiders, such wisdom has contributed to a social relation style with outsiders which gives emphasis on equality, how minor a group of people is.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From what was briefly discussed and the reading of the texts above, it can be inferred that there is a connotation in the form of hidden hegemonic relation in the *Dou Mbawa* culture. In such a full relation of domination the *Raju* cultural practice shows its flexibility in playing a role in avoiding the local identity from being marginalized by the dominant culture. In the cultural adaptation process, the Islamic elements and Christian elements form the unique configuration of the *Raju* cultural practice which is highly colorful and dynamic. With such a character the *Raju* cultural practice, to some extent, has become the practice of conflict management. Such a significant cultural position for the *Mbawa* plural society can be identified from the discursive space made available and its potential to be used as a means of communication.

From what was inferred above, the writer would like to reflectively recommend two suggestions. First, the state interference and the legitimacy of official religions should not marginalize the local tradition and identity; they should orient towards the local cultural strengthening, as it is the way in which any cultural opposition will not lead to disintegration. Second, the conflict management should not be structural as wisdom does not only belong to the state with its governmental bureaucracy. A society has knowledge which can be used to open its cultural mechanism to overcome its internal problems.

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