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An "Old" Religion in "New Order" Indonesia: Notes on Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation

Anne Schiller
North Carolina State University

This paper examines the relationship between state-controlled religious modernization and the construction of identity among Ngaju Dayaks, a rainforest people of Central Kalimantan, Indonesian Borneo. In 1980, Indonesia's Ministry of Religion recognized Ngaju indigenous religion, known as Kaharingan, as a variety of Hinduism. Thus, whereas in the past beliefs and practices associated with Kaharingan were deemed custom (adat), they are now considered religion (agama). The paper suggests that the reclassification of Kaharingan as religion has important implications for the negotiation of ethnic identity. Although most Ngaju have converted to world religions, a vocal and increasingly powerful minority now claim primordial status for Hindu Kaharingan as a constituent of Ngaju ethnicity. The paper concludes that the role of religion in ethnicity will continue to be contested, even as the peoples of this region seek to construct and portray themselves in a manner that will facilitate their participation in identity politics at both the local and national levels.

In a contribution to the literature on new religious movements (NRMs), Raymond Lee (1994: 473) observed that their complexity is amplified by the ethnic dimensions of religious participation. Citing the case of Malaysia, he suggested that non-Islamic NRMs are subject to less state monitoring than their Islamic counterparts. Whereas the former are generally not ethnically exclusive, Lee pointed out that the latter's memberships almost wholly comprise Malays (Lee 1994: 477). On a related note, concerning the evolving role of Islam in the construction of Malay ethnicity, Nagata has pointed out that "empirical evidence seems to suggest that . . . under certain conditions religion and language may play a primordial role" in "the preservation of ethnic status" (Nagata 1982: 92). The political dimension of the relationship between religious movements and ethnicity is significant in other Southeast Asian nations, too, and in "old" as well as new faiths. Across the Straits of Malacca, in Indonesia, the state casts a watchful eye not only on NRMs, but also upon indigenous religions that become foci for ethnic sentiments.

Its status as the world's largest Islamic country notwithstanding, Indonesia is characterized by profound religious heterogeneity. Its population includes speakers of hundreds of different languages, claiming membership in at least as many ethnic groups. Ethnicity is often controversial, as the state offers rewards and disincentives for demonstrating it in particular ways, i.e., for foregrounding particular ethnic attributes. For example, religion figures prominently among the

constituents of identity among many Indonesian peoples. Geertz has argued that in Indonesia, religion often ranks high among the "gross actualities" within which a "people's" sense of self remains bound up," and with which the state must come to terms (Geertz 1973: 258). For purposes of this paper it is useful to extend the argument to include *adat*. Throughout Indonesia, many ethnic groups are associated with practices, beliefs, and customary laws known as *adat*. Whereas the cultivation of some dimensions of *adat*, such as regional costume and dance, is encouraged by the state, *adat* is also often associated with supernatural beliefs and ritual practices. Some regional languages do not distinguish between *adat* and religion. However, the state insists upon separation of these conceptual categories.

I would suggest that in Indonesia, "religion," *agama*, as it is popularly understood, is an emergent field of discourse which seeks to supplant local discourses on the nature of the sacred and of the supernatural world. The significance with which religious affairs are accorded by the government is reflected in the first of the Five Principles of State (*Pancasila*), i.e., Belief in an All-embracing God (*Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa*). On this topic, Kipp and Rodgers have noted that:

> The first of the Pancasila tenets is elaborated in two statements in the Indonesian constitution, sections one and two of Article 29. Section one merely elaborates earlier parts by stating 'The State shall be based upon belief in an all-embracing God.' Section two adds that 'The State shall guarantee the freedom of the people to profess and exercise their own religion.' These pronouncements, and the government structures and policies that grew out of them, have become part of the context in which the religious life of all Indonesians must be understood (1987: 17).

When Indonesia achieved independence, the government formulated a stance on religion that attempted to effect compromise between factions which wanted to establish a Muslim state and those which did not (1987: 16). Since 1946, religious affairs in Indonesia have been overseen by a Ministry of Religion (*Departemen Agama*). The Ministry, which charts national religious policy, recognizes just five faiths — Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Ministry policies assure transmission of specific models for religious thought and action. In 1985, in a decision made jointly with the Ministry of Education and Culture, for example, it was announced that all school-goers, from primary through tertiary levels, would have to register for religion classes (*Kompas* 1985; *Pelita* 1985; *Suara Karya* 1985). According to the "new curriculum," which went into effect in 1994, elementary school pupils must attend *agama* classes for two hours weekly (*Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan* 1993). It is official Ministry policy to encourage the absorption of indigenous belief systems into one of the recognized religions provided they satisfy certain prerequisites. Thus, the freedom of the people to profess and exercise their own religion notwithstanding, it is unlikely that the state will recognize any more "new religions."

Indigenous belief systems are not considered *agama*; *adat* falls into the administrative ambit of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The *agama*/*adat* distinction has ramifications for the construction of identity among diverse groups of citizens. For many Indonesians, a pronounced sense of ethnic or cul-

tural identity is only gradually taking shape in response to exposure to a state system premised on the notion of "Unity in Diversity" (*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*). As the attributes of ethnicities are delineated, the issue of whether indigenous faiths assume primordial status may become subject to much local debate. In this regard, the conjunction of religious adherence and ethnicity may be especially problematic when some members of emerging ethnic groups continue to adhere to indigenous faiths, whereas others have converted to world religions. Scholars of Indonesia have yet to devote much attention to the effects of such religious pluralism on ethnic identity (Kipp 1993: 77).

The aim of this article is to discuss how deployment of the discourse of *agama* as part of state-controlled religious modernization has affected a local religion and "identity politics" among one Indonesian people, the Ngaju Dayaks. The Ngaju are rainforest dwellers of the Province of Central Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo). Discussion is based upon data collected during the author's three periods of anthropological field research in Kahayan and Katingan River villages, and in Palangka Raya, the provincial capital. Initial research was conducted over an eighteen month period in 1982-84. Second and third visits to the field were carried out during the Summers of 1991 and 1995.[1] In all cases, I employed participant-observation methodology. I attended hundreds of ritual events and conducted structured and informal interviews in the local and/or national languages with a range of informants. My informants included traditional ritual specialists, lay adherents of the indigenous religion, religious reformers, converts to other religions, staff members of Department of Religion, and local political figures.

THE PEOPLES KNOWN AS NGAJU

The peoples known as Ngaju live along the mid and lower reaches of a number of Central Kalimantan's rivers including the Kapuas, Kahayan, Katingan, Mentaya, and their tributaries. They are horticulturalists who supplement their diet by fishing and hunting. Census figures for the Ngaju are hard to come by. Indonesian censuses do not differentiate citizens according to ethnic categories. Local estimates place the number of Ngaju-speakers at between 500,000 - 800,000 in a province with a total population of 1,517,045. Although they share a common language, known as *basa ngaju*, and similar customs, called *hadat* [Ind. *adat*], the so-called Ngaju do not constitute a "tribe" in the sense that the term is popularly understood (Schiller 1997a). Notions of identity largely revolve around membership in bilateral kin groups and geographical residence. Preferred marriage is between cross or parallel cousins in the first to third degree. Only within the last several decades has a pronounced sense of "Ngajuness" begun to

[1] Initial research in Central Kalimantan was supported by a Fulbright-Hays Award for Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad, a Wenner-Gren Foundation Grant-in-Aid, Wellesley College's Alice Freeman Palmer Award, and a Sigma-Xi Scientific Society Grant-in-Aid. Visits during 1991 and 1995 were supported by two grants from Association for Asian Studies, by the Wenner-Gren Foundation (1991), and by a North Carolina State University Faculty Development Fund Award (1995). I would like to thank Professor Eric Woodrum of North Carolina State University, and three anonymous reviewers at *Sociology of Religion*, for commenting on an earlier version of this paper.

take shape. Local and national political developments have had an important effect upon Ngaju religious practice, and hence on the relationship between *hadat*, religion, and ethnicity.

In the past, southern Bornean peoples engaged in mostly private ecstatic religious practices and an array of kin group-centered rituals. By the mid-1950s, this indigenous configuration of beliefs and practices had been given a name, Kaharingan.[2] Kaharingan is characterized by the propitiation of supernatural tutelaries. While most prayers and oblations are directed at "mid-range" supernatural beings including the village guardian (*patahu*) or to other upperworld beings known generally as *sangiang*, some lay adherents and all religious functionaries espouse belief in a high god with male and female aspects. This deity, Ranying Hatalla Langit - Jata Balawang Bulau, figures importantly in the origin myth. In general, however, the high god is not said to participate actively in the affairs of men. Apparently, few people traditionally prayed to Ranying Hatalla Langit-Jata Balawang Bulau.

Many of the rituals associated with Kaharingan require officiation by specialists known as *basir*. *Basir* traditionally learn their craft through apprenticeship (Schiller 1989). The most elaborate Kaharingan rituals provide treatment for the dead, and may involve the participation of three to nine *basir*. Death evokes a three stage ritual response, culminating with rites of exhumation and the reinterment of remains in ossuaries (*sandung*), usually alongside the bones of cognatic kinsmen. The culmination of the mortuary cycle is known as *tiwah*. *Tiwah* is performed on behalf of souls as well as physical remains; one of the primary aims of *tiwah* is to reunite the deceased and the ancestors in an "upperworld" village where they dwell in comfortable circumstances provided for them by means of sacrifices. The performance of *tiwah*, as well as other Kaharingan rituals, is hedged with proscriptions. Supernatural sanctions are said to await individuals who transgress ritual *hadat*.

Visitors to Central Kalimantan quickly confront evidence of Kaharingan ritual practices. These include the aforementioned bone repositories, the wooden posts to which sacrificial animals are tethered (*sapundu*), and shrines to *sangiang*. Despite the visual prominence of the indigenous religion, however, not all of the peoples known as Ngaju are adherents of Kaharingan. Protestant missionaries began to establish themselves in southern Borneo in 1835 (Ukur 1971). Particularly in the present century, local peoples have proved receptive to Christian proselytization. There is a growing Islamic presence as well. As a result, the Ngaju operate within a highly formalized religious arena with three primary religious options: Christianity, Islam, and the local faith, now known as Hindu Kaharingan. According to the Ministry of Religion's recent census, 67.76 percent of the province's inhabitants are Muslim, 14.31 percent are Protestant, 2.25 percent are Catholic, 15.37 percent are Hindu, and .31 percent are Buddhist (*Departemen Agama* 1994/1995). It should be noted that the category Hindu includes thousands of Balinese transmigrants to Central Kalimantan as

[2] The name Kaharingan was "officially" adopted in 1950 by prominent adherents of the indigenous faith at a meeting held in the Kahayan River village of Tangkahen. Many of those involved in the decision were among the founders of the Union of Kaharingan Dayaks of Indonesia (SKDI), an organization mentioned later in this paper (Sahari Andung, personal communication).

well as adherents of the indigenous faith. Local estimates informally place the number of avowed adherents of Hindu Kaharingan at fewer than 300,000. These relatively low numbers should not belie the importance of Hindu Kaharingan in the formulation of Ngaju identity, however.

Kaharingan and political representation

As the state seizes greater control over local expressions of spirituality, a powerful Hindu Kaharingan religious organization has assumed an increasingly high profile in community and regional political affairs. Yet this situation is not entirely new. Kaharingan has been an informal political force for many decades. Several religiously based political parties achieved regional prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, including the "Union of Kaharingan Dayaks of Indonesia" (*Sarikat Kaharingan Dayak Indonesia*). That party was founded as part of the struggle to achieve the establishment of a Dayak province and thereby escape the political control of the Muslim-dominated government of the Province of South Kalimantan. Recognition of Kaharingan as a religion on par with Christianity and Islam also figured in many activists' demands. Political action took place on various fronts, and ranged from congresses to bushfighting. In wake of this tumult the province of "Central Kalimantan" was founded in 1957 by emergency decree. Kaharingan, however, remained "unrecognized" by the Ministry of Religion.[3]

Historically, adherents of particular religions in Indonesia have tended to support specific political parties. Eventually the state decided to limit the number of political parties allowed to operate in that country. In 1967, the leaders of the "Union of Kaharingan Dayaks of Indonesia" registered with a rising national organization known as the "Work Group" or GOLKAR (*Golongan Karya*). GOLKAR has become the major vehicle of the "New Order" political regime. In 1972, some members of the Union of Kaharingan Dayaks of Indonesia founded a council known as the "Council of Religious Leaders of Indonesian Kaharingan" (*Majelis Alim Ulama Kaharingan Indonesia*), an organization which was claimed to be apolitical.[4] The council was later renamed the "Great Council of the Hindu Kaharingan Religion" (*Majelis Besar Agama Hindu Kaharingan*). As a result of the council's continued efforts, the Ministry of Religion declared Kaharingan a variety of Hinduism in 1980 (Schiller 1997b).

Although it is not precisely a "new" religious movement, Hindu Kaharingan, like many Asian NRMs (Keyes *et al.* 1994:9), has lately exhibited a high degree of religious innovation. Innovation within Hindu Kaharingan is shaped by the dominant state discourse on *agama*. Much of this innovation follows the pattern which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) have termed "institutional isomorphism," particularly of the coercive and mimetic varieties. Innovations include the strategic positioning of an extensive bureaucracy modeled after the Ministry of

[3] It should be noted that, at the time, even Hinduism, a faith embraced by nearly all Balinese, had yet to be declared a "Great Religion." See Geertz 1973:189.

[4] Despite its professed apoliticality, the council has been known to begin and end business meetings with the GOLKAR cheer.

Religion with branches at the provincial, regency, subdistrict, and village levels, the production of religious tracts, the introduction of new forms of worship, and the propagation of a notion of religious legitimacy rooted in legal mandate rather than divine inspiration.

Routinization of the local faith

In the 1970s, the council initiated a campaign to codify Kaharingan belief and practice. Its efforts have so far yielded about a dozen local language volumes, intended to standardize the form and content of Hindu Kaharingan. It has instituted weekly prayer meetings, called *basarah*, also for the dissemination of standardized doctrine. Basarah are veritable palimpsests of syncretism, drawing eclectically from various religious traditions. They revolve around sermons which explain the contents of a Hindu Kaharingan "Lesson Book" (*Buku Panaturan*), which appears to be modeled on the Bible. At the start of *basarah*, adherents recite "Five Pillars of Faith," a formula inspired by Islamic creed. The recitation is followed with a hymn and a prayer. Prior to praying, the congregation is sometimes reminded to fold their hands in the ritual posture adopted by Balinese Hindu worshipers. The council has founded a private university which awards degrees in religious education and which has begun to offer seminary-style training for Hindu Kaharingan ritual specialists. Upon completion of this three month training program, students receive professional certification as *basir*.

The content of contemporary Hindu Kaharingan dogma, as well as the form of worship, reveals the intrusion of the national discourse of *agama*. One clear example is the prominence accorded to the notion of a supreme deity. As noted earlier, in the past, a supreme deity did not figure prominently in most people's religious understandings. However the faithful are now exhorted to develop a personal relationship with "Ranying Hatalla Langit," i.e., the Creator's male aspect, and to pray for individual salvation. The rhetoric of *basarah* reinforces the consociation of religion and good citizenship. For example, at one *basarah* held in the provincial capital, the sermon began, "In the past we were referred to as the dark religion. It was true, because at that time we never held meetings for worship, we never listened to religious lessons, we didn't have a book. At that time we had not been consolidated with the Hindu Religion." Adherents are also told that "God is like the President," and other supernatural beings like "Ministers" who are in charge of particular ministries.

As a popular model of *agama* becomes embedded in public consciousness, the role of *hadat* in the formulation of "acceptable" Hindu Kaharingan rituals has been called into question. Example: In the past, sponsors and *basir* determined the format of death rituals in accordance with personalistic interpretations of *hadat*. *Basir* were contracted on the basis of personal reputation and presumed (divinely inspired) prowess. Bolstered by their mandate from the Ministry of Religion, Hindu Kaharingan council members have now assumed increasing control over the enactment of *tiwah*. The council obliges sponsors to apply for permission before the celebration can be carried out. Applications must include timetables which specify planned ritual activities. Given that *tiwah* sometimes last up to thirty-three days, these timetables are often quite complicated to pro-

duce. The council may amend these schedules, and suggest substitutes for *basir* already engaged. Police permits (required to hold public gatherings) are contingent upon council approval.[5] The council also issues lists of "prohibited" foods (varieties of fish, meat, and vegetables), and requires sponsors to sign a document attesting that they will not indulge in "inappropriate" behaviors. The latter includes gambling and disco-dancing, which are said to be not "in keeping with the Indonesian national character." Thus not only must participants concern themselves with the supernatural repercussions of transgressing *hadat*, they must weigh as well the possibility of legal reprisals for ignoring the protocol of *agama*.

Religious pluralism and Ngaju identity

New concepts of acceptability and authority are sometimes at odds with local customs, which themselves vary throughout the Ngaju region. Differences in ritual *hadat* comprise micro-level religious pluralism of tremendous local significance, as variations have traditionally served as boundary markers between peoples on different rivers. The council downplays this significance. Sponsors, many of whom feel that they must follow official directives, sometimes blame mishaps and tragedies, associated with supernatural retribution for changes in ritual *hadat*, on the council. Some surreptitiously ask *basir* to identify and extirpate "foreign" elements of ritual.

With regard to macro-level religious pluralism, the performance of Hindu Kaharingan ritual has been affected by the presence of non-adherents of the faith. Example: In the past, converts to world religions were expected to abjure participation in *tiwah*. Christians today occasionally serve as head sponsors of death rituals held on behalf of their parents or grandparents. Muslims often participate, too. When non-adherents of the local faith celebrate *tiwah*, they usually request accommodations in ritual format, including substitution of water for blood anointments. Some Hindu Kaharingan consider this to be a transgression of *hadat*. Animal sacrifices are still conducted in the traditional method, i.e., impaling animals until they succumb to blood loss. However the throats of water buffalo and cattle are now cut as well, in deference to Muslim dietary restrictions.

Given the significance traditionally accorded to variations in *hadat*, coupled with growing concern over the influence of non-adherents of Hindu Kaharingan's participation in Hindu Kaharingan ritual, the role of spirituality and religious affiliation in the construction of "Ngaju identity" has increasingly become the subject of local debate. Non-adherents of Hindu Kaharingan claim that they participate in *tiwah* out of sentiment and ethnic pride. In instances where they choose to relegate responsibility for organizing *tiwah* to the council, they purport to be demonstrating that they are "law-abiding citizens." Also, unlike children of Hindu Kaharingan villagers, the children of Christians and Muslims are not obligated to perform secondary mortuary rituals, however a

[5] The application for the police permit must include the following information: the names of the *tiwah* coordinating committee, a list of the ritual events scheduled for each day of *tiwah*, the names of the heads of families who will be participating in *tiwah*, and a list of the number and kind of animal sacrifices that will be offered at *tiwah*.

secondary celebration of sorts is held by Christians. Descendants gather to clean and decorate graves. They burn incense and host a feast. Hindu Kaharingan villagers refer to these occasions as "Christian *tiwah*." Christians often do not invite their Hindu Kaharingan kin to these observances.

Whether Christians or Muslims participate in "ethnic"rituals is a matter of personal discretion. However, in light of the 1980 Ministry of Religion's ruling, *tiwah* and other Hindu Kaharingan rituals are now indisputably "religious." Many adherents of Hindu Kaharingan therefore feel justified in objecting to non-adherents' efforts to separate *hadat* from *agama* within the context of ritual. Some have even called into question the rights of non-adherents to participate in "traditional" practices. One council spokesman declared impassionedly, "if they [referring to converts to world religions] truly understood what we had been through [to achieve official recognition], they would quit their new religions and return to Kaharingan." "Everything Ngaju," he continued, originates in the "ethic of Kaharingan."

It is evident that the ethos of Kaharingan belief and ritual is changing rapidly and dramatically. The local faith has become more explicitly and broadly "collective" (Durkheim 1965: 63). It has moved away from an emphasis on ecstatic worship, kin group-based rituals, and indigenous *hadat*, all of which mitigate against the formation of supra-familial bonds. Young adherents are learning their faith largely in the context of public worship, i.e., from the newly published Hindu Kaharingan texts (some of which will eventually number among the required readings in their religious education classes) and from *basarah*.[6] I would suggest that it is through such efforts to routinize, and, ultimately, "domesticate" local religions such as Hindu Kaharingan, that the state hopes to foster investment in a larger "moral community" of its own device, one which supersedes minority attachments.

CONCLUSION

The insinuation of religion in the genesis and expression of ethnic consciousness among indigenous Southeast Asian peoples is a phenomenon of considerable sociological significance. Religious pluralism adds yet another level of complexity here. In Indonesia, religiosity and patriotism are often conflated, creating problems for citizens who do not adhere to one of five recognized world religions. That individuals are registered by religion, not ethnic group, speaks to the ambiguous relationship between *agama* and *adat* which continues to prevail in this nation of vast linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. In the case of the Ngaju Dayaks of Central Kalimantan, the state's aggressive efforts to indoctrinate the ideology of *agama* has compelled both adherents and non-adherents of Hindu Kaharingan to confront the relationship between their cultural identity and their religious past and present. The role of religion in Ngaju ethnicity continues to be contested, even as the peoples of this region seek to construct and portray themselves in ways that facilitate their participation in the identity

[6] It is instructive to compare *basarah* which I attended in 1983 and 1995 in this regard. In 1983 sermons were generally delivered by council members. By 1995, students of the Hindu Kaharingan Religious College assumed nearly all responsibility for organizing *basarah*, and took turns delivering the weekly sermon.

politics which characterizes today's political climate. For social scientists, the implications are clear: In order to deepen our understanding of the relationship between religiousity, ethnicity, and social action in new states, we profit by studying not only new religions, but also the developments taking place within very "old" ones.

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