

# The Cultural Strategy of the East Nusa Tenggara Community in Maintaining Harmony

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## Abstract

This article is one part of research on religious perceptions of religion in the era of social media conducted in the city of Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). One of the conclusions of this study is the operation of cultural mechanisms in maintaining good relations between religions, especially Catholicism and Christianity as the dominant religion with mainly Islam, besides Hinduism and Buddhism. There are many cultural strategies that they play, including utilizing local wisdom, building kinship and starting life with cultural language. Whereas NTT has a very unique diversity of customs, ethnicity, culture, language, and religion which if not managed properly will produce a conflict, a problem that was also experienced by NTT during the Kupang riots in 1998, and Indonesia in general. The harmonious pattern of life in NTT is also confirmed by the results of the Survey of Religious Harmony Index which always places NTT as the top national province. This research is based on the paradigm of social construction which is phenomenologically approached with qualitative methods.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Strategy, Local Wisdom, Kinship, Harmony, Language of Culture.*

## INTRODUCTION

The results of a survey conducted by the Center for Religious Life, the Agency for Research and Development of the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, showed the constant ability of Kupang people to maintain harmony. From 2015 to 2019, the Religious Harmony Index survey always places NTT as the province with the highest or highest index in Indonesia. Interestingly, from all indicators of harmony, namely equality, cooperation and tolerance, NTT also produced the highest average nationally compared to other regions (Tim, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

The harmonious life in NTT shows that they have social and cultural mechanisms that have succeeded in making them one big family. This success is a great achievement amid so much diversity. The diversity of NTT can be read in many aspects. We can start by describing NTT as a province with a group of islands, with 1,192 islands, 432 of which have been named and the rest are not yet named. In the data of the Central Statistics Agency (2017: 2-3), it is mentioned, only 44 islands are inhabited, with a total population of 5,120,065 people. Administratively, NTT consists of 21 districts and 1 city. Each region has different customs from one another so that NTT is culturally heterogeneous. Kupang, the capital of NTT, is the largest island, commonly called Timor Island. Apart from following the organizational structure of the government, including the government of the Republic of Indonesia, the NTT community in general still feels bound to the old tribal and traditional structures (Fernandez in Aziz, 2019: 148).

Another diversity is the nature of NTT which has provided two interesting sides that influence the characteristics of the people of Kupang, namely soothing and hard. In the dry season, the temperature can be very hot, stinging. Conversely, if the rainy season arrives, Kupang or NTT, in general, will turn completely green to cool because it is decorated with colorful *sepe* flower (local language) or flamboyant flower or also called Christmas flower because it usually blooms before Christmas. Likewise the diversity of groups of people consisting of Timor or Meto, Belu and Kupang or Helong and the three

major tribes inhabiting the island of Timor, namely Pit'ais, Amabi and Taebenu, and other tribes on several islands around the island of Timor. Also in its history, Kupang was inhabited by Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese and English (Soh and Indrayana 2008: 54-55).

In terms of language diversity, it is not easy to identify the number of languages in NTT. The same thing if you want to refer to ethnic groups because this term will cause a new problem because, for example, in Rote Island alone, 18 kingdoms were found and according to custom must be one ethnic group because the local language is one, namely Rote language even though between Oenale and Bilba striking differences in terms of language, but eventually they can understand one another (Parera, 1994: 29). Schulte-Nordholt in Parera (1994: 34-35) also states that the language of Timorese can be divided into two groups, namely Sawu, Sumba, Bima, and Manggarai. The second group are languages that are east of the first group, which according to Jonker (in Soh and Indrayana, 2008: 34) may consist of Rote, East Flores, Timor, Seram, Buru and as far as the Kei and Aru Islands. The distribution of tribes in different languages, which because of their dialect makes them not understand each other, is found in almost all major islands.

In the religious aspect, Suparlan in Koentjaraningrat (2007: 224) also stated that the native religion of the Timorese centered on a belief in the existence of *Uis Neno* or the god of the sky. This god is considered the creator of nature and the preserver of life in the world. Ceremonies addressed to the celestial gods are intended to call for rain, sunshine, or to obtain offspring, health, and well-being. Besides having faith in the sky god, they also believe in *Uis Afu* or the earth goddess who is the consort the sky god. The ceremonies addressed to him are intended to ask for the blessing of the fertility of the land that is being planted. Also, they believe in supernatural beings who inhabit certain places, such as forests, springs, rivers and certain trees.

Religion in its aspect as a formal religion, in BPS records (2017) stated that NTT consists of Catholic (55.19%), Protestant (35.29%), Islam (9.30%), Hinduism (0.21%), and Buddha (0.01%). If Christianity is predominantly in Kupang, Catholicism is more common in the Flores islands (Koentjaraningrat in Koentjaraningrat 2007: 200). As for local religions, such as Marapu and ancestor worship religions which are shown as seen in traditional houses or sacrificial places in almost all tribes in NTT, remain influential.

The uniqueness of NTT is the ethnic and religious identities still have very strong links, because the majority of members of a tribe will follow a certain religion, and the majority of other tribes adhere to another religion. Religious conversion is almost rare except through marriage (Prior, 2007: 182-185). The interrelation between local and major religions, also noted by Fox (1980: 235-242), refers to the differences in religious practices between the people of Timor Kupang and the people of Rote Island who are both members of the Evangelical Church in Timor, and by Tule (2000: 3-4) by referring to the Keo Muslim pilgrimage (*hajj*) departure procession in Worowatu, Ngada.

As such, NTT is a very interesting research field. Not only is the cultural landscape very diverse, but also the results of the cultural actions of its people, both individually and in groups. They are bound in the same family, namely culture developed through kinship. Harris (1969: 16) states that the concept of culture will descend into a pattern of behavior that is bound to certain groups, namely to become a "custom" or "ways of life" of humans. The ability to manage this diversity requires a cultural strategy to produce harmony and high tolerance.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Utilizing Local Wisdom: "Home Culture"**

The term local wisdom contains many meanings. Quaritch Wales (in Aziz, 2019: 139) states that local wisdom is "common characteristics shared by the majority of

community members as a result of their past experiences". All of these characters can change and/or adapt themselves especially to the dominant culture or civilization that comes later. Whereas Sibarani and Gavrielides (2018: 3) formulate local wisdom as "local cultural values and knowledge that are wisely operationalized to regulate the social life of a community". An interesting opinion was expressed by Ellen, Parkes, and Bicker (in Aziz, 2019: 139) who explained that local wisdom as indigenous knowledge that refers to treatment and medicine in a particular cultural environment with several characteristics.

Based on the above understanding, indigenous knowledge can be considered as practical knowledge obtained by local communities for generations with imitation even through trial and error. Berkes (in Maridi, 2017: 118; Berkes, 2008: 31) uses the term traditional ecological knowledge (traditional environmental knowledge) to refer to a very broad scope of local wisdom in question, with the formula "a collection of knowledge, practices, and beliefs that develops through the process of adaptation, which is passed down from one generation to another through culture, which is related to the relationship between living things (including humans) and their environment. This traditional environmental knowledge is owned collectively in the form of stories, songs, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, customary law, local languages, and natural resource use.

Utilization of local wisdom (empowering local wisdom) is an effort to increase the usefulness or benefits (increasing usefulness) of local wisdom deliberately carried out by individuals, groups or institutions. The people of NTT can utilize their local wisdom when facing a very serious conflict event, namely the Kupang riots in 1998, although the scale of the conflict is still smaller than the Ambon riots in Maluku or Poso in Central Sulawesi. But like conflicts in general, the Kupang riots continued to produce deep trauma. According to Kolimon (2018: 260), the Kupang riots triggered collective trauma and old fears as a result of violence and suffering during the transition of power from the Old Order to the New Order in 1965-1966. Tule (2000: 94-100) stated the 1998 riots had damaged the culture of tolerance and harmony of NTT people.

The interesting is how the people of NTT get out of the problem of conflict by promoting the Home Culture (House Culture). Philip Tule stated that after the riots, there was a deep sense of regret among individuals and institutions, especially Christians who were shown by giving protection to Buginese Muslims from further attacks, assistance to refugees and assistance to rebuild damaged houses of worship. Another very interesting reaction was the formation of provincial-level religious leaders to conduct safaris throughout the province called the Safari Leader of the Religious Movement. At the very least, conflict resolution can be generated because of third parties as mediators, governments that effectively monitor the potential for conflict, the nobility of collective life based on religious values in religious celebrations attended by adherents of different religions, sublimation of conflict into recreational culture (such as *cakalele* dance), and recognition of binding traditional culture. The spirit of reconciliation like this by Tule needs to be encouraged to become permanent through a long-term cultural approach, namely by promoting and strengthening "Home Culture".

"House" for Tule is not merely interpreted as a physical building that is inhabited by a group of people, but rather as a symbolic form which means attachment to the spirit of the ancestors in a social unity. The house is a cultural force that functions centripetally in uniting its citizens into a social unit so that it can be called a "home-based society". the context of the Keo community in Ngada for example, home culture is manifested in a "ritual house" (*sa'o nggua*), with a pair of lower social units such as "big house" (*sa'o mere*) and "source house" (*sa 'o pu'u*), and 'large basket' (*mboda*), 'medium basket' (*gata*), and 'small basket' (*wati*). In this context, "kinship culture" is built around a "traditional house" that can bring together people from various religious backgrounds with their

respective degrees of autonomy but in a spirit of tolerance and harmony.

Now, after two decades after the Kupang riots, harmony, especially the two major religions, namely Christianity and Islam, has been built very well. Sodli (2009: 70) in his research stated that the two diverse peoples have succeeded in establishing good cooperation, for example, construction of places of worship, celebrations of religious holidays, and political activities. Cooperation in places of worship is done by building or rehabilitating places of worship. If there is construction or rehabilitation of the church, Muslims help workers such as leveling the yard, carrying bricks. Conversely, if there is a mosque building or rehabilitation, there are Christians who also help with energy. In commemoration of religious holidays such as Christmas, Muslims are invited and attend, food for Muslims is set apart. Muslims also wish Merry Christmas to their Christian neighbors.

### **Binding Diversity Through Kinship System**

Kinship as a manifestation of custom and culture becomes a capital used by NTT people to build relationships in a wider social space. Theoretically, this reality by Bourdieu (1977, 1984) he called social capital and cultural capital played in diverse lives as arenas. To produce habitus, life patterns that produce harmony with the main basis of diversity are then continuously socialized, especially in families with different religious backgrounds.

Mawardi (2009: 226) states that the pattern of kinship is wherein one family there are adherents of different religions "culture" that develops in the Naikolan community still upholding the principles of their ancestors. Their ancestors did not collect wealth but gathered relatives without distinguishing between tribes and religions. Kinship especially through marriage has been firmly planted as a foundation of brotherhood between communities in general in NTT and is a supporting factor for harmony. In line with Mawardi, Khalikin (2016: 48) found the same thing in the Ende community, namely that marriage is one of the unifying media for people of different ethnicities and religions.

Rodemeier's research (in Aziz, 2019: 170) states that Muslim communities in the Pantar and Alor islands (Alor Besar, Pandai, Baranusa, Bakalang, and Lerabaing) are in the midst of Christian society, if Muslim men marry Christian women but are unable to pay a dowry, then he must convert, live and work in his wife's family and agree that one day his daughter will marry a Christian. Changes in religion due to marriage both men and women often occur, although Muslim communities tend to get married among their communities.

With such events, the kinship relationship will develop between the Muslim community of immigrants (in the local dialect *watang* meaning the beach) and the Christian community of the native population (in the local dialect *woto* is called the land of the land). Nevertheless, the two Muslim and Christian communities, in particular, the Muslim in Pandai and the Christians in Helangdohi, consider themselves of the same ancestor and hold to the same slogan, "different religions but we are one".

In rebuilding kinship relations, especially after the Kupang riots, the role of women in NTT cannot be ignored. It can even be said that they are called border crossers to bridge harmony, and this reality is common. Kolimon (2018: 247-257) gives an interesting account of what happened in South Central Timor (TTS), namely to Bugis Muslim migrants from the sub-ethnic Bone with Meto Christians. According to Kolimon, a Meto Christian woman married to a Bugis man would follow her husband's family and religion, which is to become Muslim.

Citing Wickeri, Kolimon also stated that humans are not able to live without cultural and religious boundaries. These boundaries are functional in building and maintaining individual and community identities, strengthening solidarity between people

and connecting individuals with the Almighty. Admittedly, the boundaries are never constant and the drive to cross the boundaries of cultural and religious identity is very large, especially when a society experiences an increasing plurality and enters the era of globalization. The Christianity described by Kolimon had a great influence on the Meto people, but they also retained their customs. They do not necessarily abandon their local ritual habits, but often mix them with Christian rituals. In this context, becoming a *mualaf* (a new convert to Islam) means being willing to embrace a hybrid identity among the various religions.

Becoming a *mualaf* to a Christian woman, Meto is an act of crossing boundaries that requires courage. Kolimon explained, women who convert to another religion because of marriage will experience ostracism by their families and communities, and are seen as traitors to their traditional community and religion. The women were described as selling Jesus Christ and analogous to the story of Judas in the Bible who sold Jesus with 30 pieces of silver coins. The women have been considered dead by their decision to marry Muslim men. However, it is precisely they who have built a bridge of harmony between their husband's extended family and parents and their local community.

Kolimon refers to the Meto tradition, that in the event of grief such as the death of a close relative, extended family, friends, and neighbors will come to the funeral home expressing their condolences spontaneously without being invited. Only during joyful times such as wedding receptions, invitations are sent. Thus, those present at a sad time such as a funeral are only good friends and known people, while strangers do not attend. Muslim women (*mualaf*) try to reconnect with parents, families and the communities in which they live. With such actions, these women are building bridges between their communities and local communities in the socio-cultural realm of life.

In addition to the Meto people, Mawardi (2009: 2015) also found that the culture attached to the Naikolan community in NTT was kinship. Kinship is the bond between the close relationship between Christians and Muslims. Each of them is aware of a blood connection and must be maintained. Marriage between Christians and Muslims from different tribes and conversion. Cultural assimilation because each will adjust to his new environment.

Cultural strategies through kinship in NTT can be considered as a model of genetic harmony. Sulanam (2018:166) states that genetic harmony is an inheritance that is inherited in families for generations which can only be found in families who have mixed religions or different religious beliefs. In NTT many families have different belief backgrounds whose harmony practices are usually displayed during religious services of each individual in the family. For example, if he is a Muslim, at the time of Eid (Lebaran) a non-Muslim family will pay his respect, and vice versa.

### **Cultural Language: "hearing the voice of an insider"**

The social life of NTT people is quite dynamic. The view of "outsiders" who think NTT people are hard and rude only from their physical appearance is not entirely correct. The dynamics in a social relationship can occur in any area, including NTT. The "coolness" of the NTT people seems real because of the bond of brotherhood bound by norms and customs. Strong kinship between them can occur even if in one family there are adherents of different religions (see again Parera, 1994; Soh and Indrayana, 2008).

Informant Jon Seja, an employee at the NTT Provincial Office of the Ministry of Religion stated that any problems and conflicts involving both internal and other members of the community, especially in Kupang, could be collectively resolved because they did so with the same feeling as Kupang people even though they were of different religions because in Kupang one family can have three to four religions. An open, spontaneous and

sometimes vulgar character can make any problem quickly resolved. Jon Seja calls his empirical experience a form of authentic harmony. He said harmony in the real world also occurred in cyberspace, especially social media.

Authentic harmony according to another informant, Ambrosius Korbaffo, a Head Office of the Ministry of Religion of the North Central Timor Regency (TTU), was built with an awareness of ancient civilization inherited from ancestors long ago. The harmony made by the Kupang people is totality. The informant gave an example, in Alor when Christians were going to build a church, the cross was sometimes placed in the house of a Muslim. Even when word got out that there was a radical group going to Kupang, the Muslims themselves led a group of various religious elements to the airport.

In addition to authentic harmony, other informants also mentioned the existence of harmony in totality other than because of the informant's statement above, also because of cultural language that was built through human friendship with the universe. This was stated by Piet Manahet and M. Valens Boys (in Neonbasu, 2013: xiii) stated that "Timor people see that the entire natural world has a life force. Thus Timor people must foster good and harmonious relations with the world around them...All strength and power are believed by humans as an element that will automatically reward all human actions with good or evil."

The two forms of harmony above carried out through the cultural agenda have a profound effect on the work of religious leaders, traditional leaders, and state apparatus, as well as the conclusion of Mawardi (2009: 226) which states that adat leadership is very strong. Ambrose Korbaffo, as an official in carrying out his duties and functions, always included the values of the Kupang people. He creatively created flyers whose contents were full of invitations to live in harmony and tolerance. While other religious leaders include the invitation through the symbols made in places of worship.

The same information was revealed by informant I Gusti Putu Wirata, also an employee at the Office of the Ministry of Religion of TTU Regency who although Hindu was still treated equally by Kupang people in general. The Kupang people are open to outsiders, the condition is that they don't only interfere with the local wisdom that guides living together. Not surprisingly, every religious program of minority religions will be highly valued and even facilitated by the majority religion because for them, other religions are a compliment that will make Kupang culture richer. The NTT Province Dharma Shanti event conducted by Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia which is routinely every year is always attended by notables and heads of all religions and is often facilitated directly by the NTT Governor at his official residence.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although NTT has a lot of diversity, but in the context of religious life, NTT is considered successful in establishing and maintaining harmony between religions. This harmony can occur because NTT has several local wisdom that is also in line with the lives of its people who are still strongly influenced by the heritage of their ancestors, such as religion, law, customs, and values that originate from traditions. Also, the people of NTT have so much cultural wealth, such as ethnicity, language, and religion. Even the climatic conditions also differ from one region to another.

However, NTT people also can manage diversity by utilizing local wisdom, for example by empowering the wisdom of "Home Culture", starting life by using "cultural language" as a universal idiom, not "religious language" which essentially often distinguishes interfaith beliefs religion. This cultural strategy is inseparable from the life of the people of NTT that ties a variety of diversity through kinship systems. One family can consist of various religions. And the position of women is very important because it

can cross cultural boundaries.

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