

Staging Difference

Inter-religious Dynamics among Kempo Manggarai Catholics and Muslims in Post-Suharto Indonesia

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The processes of democratisation and decentralisation ensuing the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 have changed the religious landscape of the Indonesian archipelago sustainably. As an outcome of more democratisation, various political and religious claims, orientations, and forces that had been repressed under the long period of the military regime could be voiced openly and turned into collectives and parties. Besides, decentralisation has changed the political arena of many Indonesian regions, where renegotiations of political and religious authority have been accompanied by struggles between various ethnic and religious collectives competing for political influence, public awareness, status, and recognition. In my doctoral thesis, I explore the transformations of the „religious field“ (Bourdieu 2000) in post-Suharto Indonesia with a regional focus on the Kempo Manggarai area on the island of Flores in eastern Indonesia. I study how the political changes on the national level have impacted local inter-religious dynamics in the multi-religious setting of Kempo Manggarai. Examining the social and material practices that form religious identifications, and by implication, demarcate boundaries in everyday life between and within the two main religious collectives, this research project concentrates on three main issues:

Imagining Religious Landscapes

The atmosphere of distrust and insecurity that has emerged in the wake of massive sectarian violence, civil war, and terrorist attacks in post-Suharto Indonesia has expanded beyond the context of war zone sites and other directly involved places. Communal violence, war atrocities, iconoclastic acts as well as much more subtle forms of inter-religious competition, discrimination, and intolerance are disseminated by various media channels through official and unofficial discursive genres such as narratives, images, and conspiracy theories. I analyse the circulation of mediated violence and how its reception has reshaped the social identifications, imaginaries, and convictions of Kempo Manggaraians. In this vein, I investigate how such media formats create new „communities of sentiment“ (Appadurai 2008: 8) and frame how men and women in West Manggarai imagine and classify religious landscapes in post-Suharto Indonesia. I trace, for instance, how fragments of official and unofficial discursive genres cross-fertilise and interconnect with broader national and international political rhetoric.

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Above: Calendar picture displayed in the house of a reform-oriented Muslim family.
Left: A house-shrine in the front room of Catholic Charismatic adherents.

Regimes of Signification

If religious identifications and boundaries shall become felt as real, they must become materially embodied, physically engaged, and ritually performed by means of different sensible forms (Keane 2008, Meyer 2009, Morgan 2005). In this perspective, my analysis relates closely to the broader scholarly work that studies how the formation of religious experience is organised and perpetuated. In other words, the preoccupation with specific practices and technical actions, such as speaking, viewing, listening, touching, eating and so forth, by which religious practitioners discipline their body and attune their senses in order to experience „the sacred“. On the one hand, my work focuses here on the semiotics of food, the politics of commensality, and the collective organisation of sentiments such as disgust. On the other hand, it deals with visual aspects of Catholicism and Islam and identifies different acts of looking – including the avoidance of looking at specific pictures – as religious practice. It examines the religious and non-religious artefacts that are on display in houses and asks what roles they perform in shaping religious subjectivities and collectives.

The Pluralisation of the Religious Field

The third part of this research looks at the local adoption and appropriation of global religious discourses that bring about new religious lifestyles and forms of religious piety. These new, more exclusive religious orientations, for instance Charismatic Catholicism or Reformist Islam, challenge hitherto existing religious authorities. Reshaping ideas of time, discipline, growth, and personal development, such „totalizations of forms of life“ (Kapferer 2010) aim at turning individuals into moral selves.

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