Hindu Kaharingan across Time: Anthropological Portrayals of a Religion in Transition Keynote Address

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Keynote Abstract

The beliefs and religious practices of Kalimantan's indigenous peoples have been documented by social scientists and others for well over a century. Hindu Kaharingan, however, is unique in the robust level of scientific attention that it has attracted. Anthropologists have had the privilege of investigating and analyzing part of Hindu Kaharingan's unfolding story. The vitality of Hindu Kaharingan and its role in local identity continues to generate interest among Indonesian and foreign researchers alike. This presentation examines changes in how Kaharingan has been portrayed by anthropologists over time. It argues that the recognition of Hindu Kaharingan was a watershed moment in indigenous religious activism. Since that time, Hindu Kaharingan has often been cited as an example of a native religion that has survived and thrived in the face of social transformation. Yet, interest in Hindu Kaharingan is not limited to academicians only. In 1996, with the encouragement of local cultural activists, the National Geographic Society produced a

	television film about Kaharingan. While the film led to broader appreciation across the globe of Dayak culture, its production also raised complex issues regarding how controversial aspects of Ngaju death rituals should be portrayed. The presentation concludes with a call for new research, conducted by adherents of Hindu Kaharingan themselves and published in multiple languages in scientific journals with the highest peer review standards, to add more perspectives to this exceptional story of cultural survival and identity in contemporary Indonesia.

Introduction

The indigenous religion of Central Kalimantan, now Hindu Kaharingan, has long attracted attention from researchers and others**.** Books and articles and remarks about Kaharingan or comparing it to religions elsewhere have appeared in many languages. Some were written by Indonesian or foreign scholars, some by the international blogging public. Some are more accurate than others. The aim of this presentation is to address the unique status of the religion in the academic discipline of anthropology and discuss what some anthropologists have said about it. Anthropologists are among those most fascinated by Kaharingan, indeed by Hinduism in Indonesia generally.

My career as an anthropologist began in Palangka Raya in 1982, when there was no paved road to Banjarmasin but there still were abandoned Russian tractors along Jalan Tangkiling. When I arrived, Bapak Tjilik Riwut still visited town; I used to keep his book *Kalimantan Memanggil* on my desk. Actually I kept two books, the other being *Hasil Rapat Koordinasi Majelis Besar Agama Hindu Kaharingan 1981*. It is an honor to be among some of the very same experts who originally introduced me to this religion. I am indebted to Hindu-Kaharingan and Hindu clerics and representatives of Hindu Division of the Ministry of Religion here and in Bali who allowed me to interview them at various times a period of nearly twenty years. I am glad to thank some of them again now, and respectfully remember others. It is also a privilege to meet university administrators and professors educating new generations of Hindu youth.

Palangka Raya has certainly changed over the years. In 1982, older people reminisced about Pahandut and remarked how unbelievably large Palangka Raya had become. Today Palangka Raya has more than doubled again in size. Yet it exhibits clear indicators of Dayak culture that would make Tjilik Riwut proud. Hindu-Kaharingan has also transformed, adapting to twenty-first century life while retaining core practices, beliefs, and values. Some

anthropologists, myself included, suggested long ago that Hindu Kaharingan should not be considered a "new" religion. It has, however, proven itself to be an innovative one.

Just as Palangka Raya and Hindu Kaharingan have changed, so too has anthropology. The methods and theories anthropologists use and topics they study evolve constantly. But they are faithful to the principle of respecting the integrity of the cultures they study. Anthropologists rarely seek to change other peoples' cultures. Rather, they may find that their own beliefs and values shift as a result of doing field studies and forming friendships with local people.

Many of the first foreigners who described indigenous beliefs and practices in this region were careful observers. Some deeply respected local peoples and ways of life. But they were not anthropologists. The discipline of anthropology only came into existence in the middle of the 19th century. It was many decades later that trained anthropologists began coming to Borneo. For those early anthropologists, and later ones, religion was a topic of great interest. Many of anthropology's earliest theories, in fact, concerned the origin and evolution of religions and connections between religions and social order. Religion is exciting to anthropologists because it is almost a cultural universal; some type of religious behavior and belief has been found nearly everywhere. When scholars in disciplines such as theology or religious studies talk about religion, many emphasize cosmology. Anthropologists, however, are usually most interested in the relationship between religion and how society functions. That relationship is emphasized in what is probably the most widely cited anthropological definition of religion in the second half of the twentieth century. It comes from Geertz, who conducted much of his own research in Bali.

> Religion is a system of symbols which establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1973, p. 90)

Discussion

This definition of religion does not mention God, but rather how religion makes people feel and behave. Geertz's definition emphasizes symbols, not spirits. Symbols are objects, events, or something else that conveys messages about a culture to the people who

live in it. Symbols are public, visible, usually tangible expressions of ideas, values, and beliefs. They influence peoples' psychological processes and their social behaviors. Important symbols include rituals, religious books, images of god or gods, particular colors, or objects such as a *tingang*, a *penyang*, a *sandung* or a corpse. Only sometimes are all of the symbols that anthropologists study identified as "sacred" by the adherents. Indeed, Geertz's famous essay on Balinese religion focused more on economics and politics and Hindu religious organizations than cosmology.

Anthropologists are interested in studying Kaharingan partly because Ngaju death rituals have been discussed for over a century in important social science publications. In my case and to my knowledge, I was the first foreign anthropologist since the 1960s approved by LIPI to conduct research among the Ngaju. Beginning in the mid-1960s, it was difficult for anthropologists to get research visas for Central Kalimantan. Colleagues before me had applied, been unsuccessful, and completed research elsewhere. It can take time for an anthropologist to find out if she will be approved for a research permit. Students, however, need to begin research as soon as their teachers decide that they are ready, then defend their dissertations, graduate, and find a job. Thus some who may have wanted to come to Central Kalimantan applied to other provinces. Fortunately, since the later 1980s, more anthropologists have had the privilege of being here. The unique story of how Hindu Kaharingan and the field of anthropology intersect continues to unfold.

Drawing on that story, I propose partial answers to three questions in this keynote address. Why did Kaharingan become so prominent in anthropological scholarship? How has Hindu Kaharingan's 1980 recognition been addressed in publications by anthropologists, who do research elsewhere in Indonesia? Can cross-cultural understanding be enhanced by bringing together the varying interests of anthropologists, local collaborators, and outside organizations that seek to satisfy worldwide fascination with Borneo's indigenous people? The organization discussed in this particular instance is the National Geographic Society.

Anthropologists obviously seek to advance understandings of Dayak cultures. But peoples from many walks of life have written about Dayaks, including explorers, colonial administrators, linguists, geographers, missionaries, casual travelers, local experts, and local men and women with a desire to maintain their traditional culture. Early European sources report the experiences and findings of nineteenth century German, Dutch, and British explorers. One was Schwaner, who in the 1850s became the first European to cross the

western mountain chain that now bears his name. According to historical records, a local *temanggong* required Schwaner to sponsor a ritual before heading to more remote regions upriver. That Katingan nobleman insisted that Schwaner request permission from spirits, perhaps to insure they would not be angry with villagers who had allowed foreigners to travel in their territory (Posewitz, 1892, p. 29). Nieuwenhuis, a medical officer for the Dutch East Indies Army, led the first expedition to traverse the island. He eventually returned home and became a professor of ethnology – a field similar to anthropology -- at the University of Leiden. More colonial government representatives, their guests, and foreign missionaries and others arrived in Borneo as Netherlands expanded its presence in the south and east. Many left detailed records about religion. There are other sources, too, about *tiwah* that are often overlooked, including by photographers and film makers of that period.

What each of these people specifically wrote is beyond the scope of this paper. Collectively, however, their writings influenced anthropology because they were read by early social scientists whose theoretical ideas shaped the questions that future anthropologists would ask their Dayak informants. Following World Wars I and II, anthropological attention focused on the indigenous populations of British Borneo. Several excellent accounts of Iban and the Bidayuh Dayak society were published in the 1940s and 50s. Nevertheless Southern Dutch Borneo was the setting for one major study: Schärer's 1946 doctoral dissertation *The Conception of God Among a South Borneo People*. The dissertation was translated into English in 1963 as *Ngaju Religion*. It is often called the most complete description of religion in Borneo ever written. That may sound odd to many in this audience, because this audience includes local experts on Hindu Kaharingan who have been producing and publishing detailed accounts of this religion for decades. *Ngaju Religion* is a book that also reads strangely to contemporary anthropologists. It is an extraordinarily detailed account by an extraordinarily talented observer, but anthropologists would agree that it rises at least as many questions about local religion as it answers.

Schärer's knowledge of Dayak culture developed over seven years of service as a Protestant missionary. But it is important to point out that Schärer collected data before he trained to become an anthropologist. It was only when he returned to Netherlands that he enrolled in the anthropology program at Leiden. He then he returned to Kalimantan and died soon after. Had he lived, he would undoubtedly have continued to publish and probably answered some of the questions that now perplex anthropologists about his book. Schärer's admirer P.E. de Josselin de Jong wrote in the preface to the translated version that "[Schärer]

had high hopes of his second period in Borneo, when he would be able to continue his observations, this time with the backing of sound scholarly method and theory (Schärer, 1966, p. V). For all the deserved praise *Ngaju Religion* has earned, it does not represent the results of a study carried out in the manner of an anthropologist who trained before going to the field.

To understand some reasons why Schärer's description of Ngaju Religion reads strangely now, it must be considered within the context of early twentieth century Dutch anthropology. A historian has written that "The development of Dutch anthropology is largely founded on its relationship with the Indonesian archipelago" (Oosten, 2006, p. 52). Netherlands Indies became an important site of study for Dutch anthropologists, in part because it was relatively easily accessible to them. Anthropologists in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century tended to study Native Americans, in part because they were accessible. British anthropologists often studied native peoples in British colonies in Malaysia or Africa or India. It is safe to say that there were few controls placed on the researcher regarding the scope and method of research during those early studies. Imagine the difference between then and now. Before anthropologists can begin research nowadays they must apply to human subjects review boards at their universities and demonstrate that their research will not harm or upset the people they would like to study. They usually undergo in-country approval processes by scientific offices such as LIPI and generally must find a local university to agree to insure they behave appropriately and respect local laws. Earlier anthropologists also did not expect that the people they wrote about would read their books and potentially disagree with them. Nor did they usually hope to publish with indigenous collaborators, make movies with them, or be their guest at conferences.

When Schärer began graduate school at Leiden in the 1940s, the famous Borneo explorer Nieuwenhuis had just retired as Director of the Ethnology Department. The new Director, de Josselin de Jong, was known for his theoretical stance that the most characteristic feature of Indonesian societies was socio-cosmic dualism (Oosten, 2009, p. 57). By socio-cosmic dualism he partly meant that religious beliefs and social organization paralleled one another, sometimes intersecting in very clear ways. That approach, Dutch structuralism, had similarities with later French structuralism. Structuralism puts particular attention on binary oppositions, which are cultural elements that can only be understood in relation to one another. Those opposites form two parts of one system. They can be as straightforward as hot and cold or male and female, or as complex as a ritual language that has male and female

words and phrases. One expression of binary opposition is the moiety. In a moiety, in two social or ritual groups form separate but mutually dependent halves of a total system. An example would be Schärer's argument that the Ngaju was a tribe made up of a hornbill group and a watersnake group. The total system was also reflected in the concept of a god with a male and a female name and characteristics.

Dutch structuralism was influenced by French sociology, including publications by the two scholars Mauss and Hertz. In 1925, Mauss published *An Essay on The Gift*, which argued that humans everywhere live with obligations to give gifts, receive them, and repay them. The paper was interesting to structuralists because gift-giving implies an action that occurs between two individuals, two groups, or even two halves of society. In 1907 Hertz published, *A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death*. That paper concerned secondary treatment of the dead with an emphasis on Ngaju practices. Hertz discussed how an analysis of *tiwah* explains how Ngaju think and why they behave as they do, including because *tiwah* focuses their attention on relations between the living and the dead, humans and the supernatural world, and souls and corpses. Hertz based his argument on the writings of Schwaner, Niewenhuis, and other important nineteenth and early twentieth century scholars, missionaries, and colonial administrators who lived among the Ngaju, Ot Danum, and Ma'anyan. It is no exaggeration to say that, at some point in their training, the majority of twentieth century anthropologists were exposed to the work of Mauss or Hertz or both. Schärer, for example, cites Mauss in the reference section of *Ngaju Religion*. Before he died Schärer had begun his next book, *The Death Cult of the Ngaju*. He would certainly have been familiar with Hertz's essay and engaged with it in his new book.

Schärer describes Ngaju cosmology as a set of oppositions that are mirrored in the two halves of the Ngaju tribe. The hornbill group must provide the death rituals for the watersnake group, and vice-versa (1966, p. 137). Other expressions of dualism were also described in great detail, however he included little information about his indigenous sources or how much of his data came from direct observation. There are many photographs of hand drawn maps of *Lewu Tatau*, coffins, and *sandung* in the book, but no photographs of a *tiwah*-in-progress. One reviewer stated that it is not possible to distinguish Schärer's own structuralist theory-inspired interpretations from the Ngaju's own interpretations of their religion in that book (Needham, 1968, p. 609). An example is the statement that the sun and moon represent the perfection and integrity of the Ngaju tribe. Schärer did not say whether the statement represented the ideas of the people whom he studied or his own. When I arrived

in Kalimantan, my early questions, too, were influenced by that book. But no one seemed to understand what I was talking about when I asked if they belonged to the Hornbill group or the Watersnake group. I was also confused and even embarrassed because Schärer, just forty years earlier, described *basir* as hermaphrodites whose bodies represented the balance between male and female (1966: 57). The book states that it was shameful to become a *basir*. The *basir* whom I knew seemed like super heroes, however, and the one or two with whom I dared to raise this question laughed at it.

In the preface to *Ngaju Religion*, P.E. de Josselin de Jong wrote that he hoped it was not too late for other anthropologists to study Ngaju Religion (de Josselin de Jong, 1966, p. VII). As we know, many others have followed, and brought different techniques and theoretical approaches.[i]

Contemporary anthropologists, for example, are generally interested in how religion is understood by average people as well as experts. That is why anthropologists seek out many interlocutors with different levels of religious knowledge. Anthropologists no longer expect to discover systems where cosmology and society mirror one another and everything is a binary opposition. They expect that the parts of culture do not fit together like jigsaw puzzles. Anthropologists today raise questions that go beyond Geertz's definition because they want to learn about how power relations, identity movements, gender, ethnicity, and national interests affect religion. And they do not try to explain everything. They write books and articles about focused topics. Earlier anthropologists usually described cultures in a ways that seemed to be objective even though they were not. Today anthropologists do not claim to be objective. They are very forthcoming about their own training, interests and relationships, because their training, interests, and relationships affect the kinds of data they collect and questions they ask. As Mead put it: "There is no such thing as an unbiased report upon any social situation. An unbiased report is, from the standpoint of its relevance to the ethos, no report at all; it is comparable to a color blind man reporting on a sunset" (1949, p. 299).

An example is Miles, who conducted research among the Ngaju from the late 1950s until 1963. His book *Cutlass and Crescent Moon* (1976) focused on politics, but he also published articles about Ngaju religion. Miles remarked that his research subjects seemed unfamiliar with the dualist cosmology that Schärer had described, and did not seem to think of themselves as members of one tribe. Miles' discussion of *tiwah's* economic dimensions make for an interesting paired reading with Kertodipoero's 1963 book, *Kaharingan Religi*

dan Penghidupan di Pehuluan Kalimantan. Kertodipoero did not originally train as an anthropologist, but his civil service work enabled him to travel widely and he taught anthropology at a high school in Muara Teweh. Like Miles, he was fascinated by the question of whether expenses associated with some Kaharingan rituals would influence whether adherents converted to other religions.

An anthropologist who published an account of *tiwah* in the 1980s was Dyson Penjalong of Airlangga University.[ii] Beginning late in that decade and through 2009, I published various articles, book chapters, and a book based on the results of my on-going studies in Kalimantan. Most of my publications explore the connections among indigenous campaigns to nurture Dayak identity, improve conditions for Dayak peoples, and continuing efforts to strengthen, extend, and improve access to formal and informal Hindu Kaharingan religious education. Preserving indigenous heritage was also a major interest of Kreps, whose fieldwork focused on the expansion and enhancement of the Museum Balanga, from the 1990s well into the 2000s. From about the same time, a broad study about Kaharingan specifically is Mahin's 2009 dissertation in which the anthropologist emphasizes Kaharingan's vitality. He draws attention to it, too, in another article in which he states that "Kaharingan… is not just decaying wood." (Mahin, 2012, p. 39)

Early in this address I suggested that Hindu Kaharingan's recognition has received attention from anthropologists who do not study Kaharingan themselves. In fact, Hindu Kaharingan has become a lodestone that attracts more and more scholarly attention. References to Hindu Kaharingan appear in works on the Wana of Sulawesi (Atkinson, 1983), the Kayan (Rousseau, 1983), the Luangan (Hermanns, 2019), and others. Anthropologists often compare the experiences of adherents of the *kepercayaan* that they study with the Ngaju's successful campaign for religious recognition. A 2009 ethnography of the Sa'dan Toraja notes the important role of the *Majelis Besar Agama Hindu Kaharingan* and refers to the cases of the Sa'dan and the Ngaju as "a striking contrast" (Waterson, 2009, p. 369). That anthropologist presents the poignant story of one village's last indigenous religionist who held a ritual to inform the spirits that he was finally changing religions. The anthropologist explained that "with the sacrifice of a pig and three chickens, the observance of [the traditional religion] in that village came to an end" (2009, p. 372). All those accounts carefully document the sources from whom the anthropologists collected their data and where. Most address the relationships between the anthropologists and their local interlocutors.

Concluding Remarks

An anthropologist once made the very accurate observation that "Good fieldwork is not something performed by an isolated individual or researcher, but something created by all of the people in the social situation being studied" (Wax, 1971, p. 363). Good fieldwork requires trust. Anthropologists and the people whom they study sometimes become lifelong friends. Anthropologists today often collaborate professionally on projects with their local hosts. Anthropologists, you see, hope that their interlocutors will invite them to collaborate because it represents a particular kind of validation of our efforts. In my own case, I had have had opportunities to collaborate with adherents of Hindu Kaharingan on articles and films. One was a project with the National Geographic Society. Several local experts contributed ideas and valuable advice, however my key collaborator was Mantikei R. Hanyi. A cultural activist, he wanted to introduce up-to-date portrayals of his culture and religion that emphasized the vitality of Kaharingan in modern Dayak life. In many subsequent discussions with my collaborators I noted that much of the world is interested in Dayak people largely due to old stereotypes about headhunting and human sacrifice. When National Geographic negotiated with us, they made it clear that the footage was their property and that they would tell the story. None of us on the Kalimantan-based team would be invited to participate in the editing process. Throughout filming everyone did their best to emphasize Hindu Kaharingan as it is practiced today. I suspect my local collaborators were not aware of the effort I put into trying to steer the film crew away from old stereotypes. Just a few months ago, in fact, the photographer who shot the film published a blog which spoke to that issue:

> …the film that Nat Geo put together in the editing room leaned in the direction of sensationalism. The producer who was along for the filming, kept trying to get Anne to talk about the past when *Tiwah* was reportedly associated with … sacrifices of humans rather than animals. She refused to talk about any of that because it was no longer part of the ritual and may never have been widespread in the past. Yet he kept asking. .. But by telling the story through their such western eyes, they managed to … miss the spiritual and uplifting parts. In quieter moments as Anne and I were getting to know one another in the days of filming, she would talk with such respect about the beauty and the grace of the *Tiwah*. (Aarons, 2019)

Two decades later, the film *Borneo: Beyond the Grave* has probably been watched by well over 70 million people. It has been dubbed into many languages, including Indonesian. Despite its shortcomings, it certainly achieved the goal of attracting greater awareness of modern Dayak life and Kaharingan's resilience. There is no doubt that some of the tourists who arrived here in the 90s and 2000s were attracted by the film.

To conclude this address, as someone who has had the privilege of spending time with adherents of Kaharingan and following developments in Hindu Kaharingan, I am gratified to see that in the new millennium this religion remains vital, vigorous, and important. I am glad anthropologists contribute to understandings of this faith and shared their findings widely. As you move forward in your own studies and careers I encourage you to seek opportunities to collaborate inside and outside your discipline. Keep in mind that your future collaborators will have theoretical expectations based on what they have read or seen in the past. Assume the role of equal partner as you address new research questions about Hindu Kaharingan while acknowledging the importance of multiple perspectives. I end by enjoining local scholars in every field to continue to publish original field data collected using appropriate research methods. Earlier published sources are important resources; however there are always new questions to explore and new theories that will help answer them. I remind rising scholars that to be part of the international scholarly conversation you must publish your work in journals with high peer review standards and in multiple languages. Not all journals are equal in print or on line. Peer review by someone who is not familiar with your topic and your discipline is not equal to peer review by someone who is knowledgeable about your topic in your discipline. Scholars who publish in highly ranked journals and academic presses, however, become part of theoretical and methodological conversations that may continue for years, decades, even centuries. The on-going story of Hindu Kaharingan in anthropology is one such powerful example.

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[i] *Space limitations do not permit discussion of every anthropologist's or ethnologist's contributions on the Ngaju. References to other selected examples, including Danandjaya, J. (1971), Jay, S. (1993), Kuhnt- Saptodewo. J.S. (1999), Kuhnt-Saptodewo, J.S. and Kampffmeyer. H. (1993), Mallinckrodt. J. (1924/25) and Mallinckrodt. J. and Mallinckrodt-Djata, L. (1928) are included in the bibliography.*

[ii] *Also among materials of interest to anthropologists of the Ngaju are annotated translations by Baier. See Baier, M. 1977, 1987, and 2015.*