Culture and Religion: Dialogue on the Tensions between Tradition and Religious Perceptions in Local Cultural Preservation

Iim Imadudin[1], Lia Nuralia[2]

{imadudin1975@gmail.com[1], nuralialia72@gmail.com[2]}

Research Center for Prehistoric and Historical Archaeology BRIN

Abstract. One of the crucial issues in cultural preservation is the tension between cultural values and religious perceptions in performing traditional ceremonies or rites. This research aimed to reveal the tension between cultural and religious perceptions in three cases: *Ruwatan Laut* in Lampung, *Nyalin* in West Java, and *Haul Kalembak* in Banten. In addition, it also dialogues the tension between cultural values and religious perceptions and tries to find a model of cultural preservation that can resolve it. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods and a literature study. The results show that tensions lead to the sustainability and change of local culture. Therefore, an intense dialogue is needed to find a middle ground from the tension. From a broader perspective, this paper is part of the issue of multiculturalism and religious moderation that continues to be strengthened in realizing a better Indonesia.

Keywords: Cultural preservation, tradition, religious perceptions.

1 Introduction

Diversity is something that Indonesian society is given, so it is called a "plural society" [1]. An archipelagic nation with over 17,000 islands has diverse customs, cultures, ethnicity, religion, and belief. This diversification exists and grows within the framework of the Indonesian Unitary State (NKRI). This diversity potential is both a social capital and an invaluable cultural wealth. This difference, however, has the potential to cause conflict. The diverse Indonesian population has a solid attachment to their respective identities.

Religion is one of the actual diversities in the life of the nation and state. The religions adopted by the Indonesian population today are Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Pluralism in the context of diversity is accepted as a tangible reality in Indonesian history. Various religions, with their civilizations, came and were accepted as the treasures of Indonesia's wealth. The phenomenon of religious plurality is a social fact that must be faced by modern Indonesian society today.

The reality of diversity in Indonesian society can be explained by two key terms: multiculturalism and pluralism. The two terms are often interchanged and used in different contexts and are often considered the same. Nevertheless, multiculturalism and pluralism have differences. Kewuel [2] mentions that multiculturalism is better understood to be related to cultural diversity, while pluralism is more likely to be associated with religious diversity. Religious pluralism is a distinctive discourse because it deals with spiritual phenomena that affect human life. Because it is related to belief or faith, the jargon attached includes messages of tolerance, living in harmony, and dialogue. Meanwhile, multiculturalism is more inviting to understand and accept the 'other' as long as the difference occurs because of the cultural process.

Multiculturalism as an ideology encourages respect for the equality of all human beings and their humanity. It was operationally manifested through social institutions, namely culture, as a guide to the daily life of a group of people. In this context, multiculturalism is a concept that legitimizes cultural diversity [3].

The research topic on the tension between culture and religious perception becomes essential when, in the author's view, it can be viewed at the cultural discourse and practice level. At the level of discourse as it appears in public spaces such as seminars, discussions, workshops, and so on. Comments and questions about the relationship between culture and religion in cultural practices, especially in traditional ceremonies, are always welcome. There are concerns about traditional rituals or ceremonies that are inconsistent with Islamic teachings. This problem is undoubtedly an obstacle to the preservation of local culture, which has recently received more space for expression after the issuance of Law No. 5 of 2017 concerning the advancement of culture.

In terms of cultural practice, many cases have arisen regarding tensions between cultural actors and religious adherents. For example, a viral video on social media about a man kicking an offering at the location of the Mount Semeru eruption in early January 2022. He said that offerings made God angry. While shouting Takbir, he threw away and kicked two trays of offerings into the abyss. The bearded man in a black vest and grey sarong said offerings anger Allah so that they will unwittingly bring down his punishment [4]. Several other cases also occurred in connection with the implementation of traditional ceremonies.

The tension in the form of discourse in the public sphere and cultural practices about culture and religion seems to be an effort to find a model of productive relationships. The diversity of the Indonesian people is like a knife with a double meaning. In terms of diversity, this is a gift for the Indonesian people, but on the other hand, it can be a big problem in efforts to integrate and build social cohesion.

The relationship between religion and culture has been widely carried out in intra and inter-religious contexts. Similarly, several studies have been carried out more specifically to address the relationship between religion and local traditions. Previous studies have been written by Kastolani, and Yusof [5], who see religion and culture from a compromising point of view; Ummatin [6] reviews local traditions not only in mystical dimensions but also sociologically, culturally, and economically; Haryanto [7] encourages the need for a meeting room for culture and religion so that there is a balance in society; Saputra et al. [8] which views that there are differences in the interpretation of Islamic law related to cultural rituals; Juhansar et al. [9] strengthen the existence of a compromise between religion and culture in order to avoid conflict;

Budiyanto [10] who sees the practice of art as a kind of religion; and Hasan and Susanto [11] saw compatibility between cultural values and religion.

The problem is that the dialogue only focuses on one theoretical analysis and does not arrive at recommendations for preserving local culture. How can religious adherents and cultural actors coexist and get mutual respect? The phenomenon of tension between religious perceptions and traditional practices has the potential to disrupt social cohesion. Therefore, apart from objective and subjective reasons, this study seeks to uncover several cases and place them in a productive discourse on the relationship between religion and local culture.

2 Research Methods

The research method is descriptive qualitative to provide a systematic and factual description of the existing phenomena. To support the research data, primary and secondary data were searched. Secondary data was gathered by searching the library and the internet for various research sources related to the topic under consideration. Primary data is obtained through observations and interviews in the field. The research locations were in West Java, Banten, and Lampung. The location selection is based on West Java, Banten, and Lampung being in the same cultural distribution area, full of acculturation values. Previous studies conducted by the author also support the choice of location.

This research must explain two terms: religious perception and local culture. Religion as a text is absolute, but when it is contextualized, it becomes relative. Therefore, in this study, the term "religious perception" is used, which refers to the interpretation of religious teachings, which may vary. If we look at the pattern of religious thought, there are at least two poles: puritanism and accommodationism. The puritanical style understands religious teachings textually as written in the holy book, while the accommodationist style views religious texts contextually based on space and Time.

The local culture referred to here is focused on rites. Rites are defined as procedures for carrying out ceremonies or activities based on specific values and carried out by community groups continuously and passed on to the next generation, among others, various celebrations, birth anniversaries, marriage ceremonies, death ceremonies, belief rituals, and their equipment [12].

3 Result and Discussions

There are three forms of dialectical relations between religion and local culture, namely indigenization, negotiation, and conflict [13]. Indigenization is understood as the contextualization of Islam in its place of development. In this case, it is interpreted as adapting Islam to local traditions. Islam is accommodated in culture without losing its identity. Abdurahman Wahid promoted indigenization. He said that if Islam were identified with Middle Eastern culture, people would be uprooted from their local cultural roots [14]. Negotiation is defined as an Islamic dialectic effort with various cultures in society. In negotiations, there is a need to change existing traditions jointly. A conflict is a form of the dialectical relationship between religion and local culture in which there is a mutual attitude between religion and culture [15].

Referring to the Main Thoughts of Regional Culture document (PPKD), one of the problems that often occurs is the conflict between religious leaders and cultural actors in organizing rituals [16]. Generally, there is a conflict between rite values and religious perception [17]. Conflicts between cultural and religious actors occur with various variations, as will be explained in the next section.

3.1 Several Cases of Tension

Haul Kalembak is one of the rites that has become extinct. The term "haul" is not a foreign term among traditional Muslims. The haul is an activity to commemorate an event or a person, while kalembak is defined as thrown or dragged by the waves. It can be interpreted that haul kalembak is a tradition that is carried out to remember the tsunami that occurred due to the eruption of Mount Krakatau in 1883 [18]. Haul Kalembak was intended as a form of gratitude for the sustenance obtained, as well as a prayer to God that calamities such as 1883 and other calamities did not befall the residents, while also praying for the victims of the disaster caused by Mount Krakatau's eruption. The implementation can begin at the village or sub-district level and progress to Cibaliung, Cinangka Anyer, and Caringin in Banten's coastal area. Before performing the Kalembak ritual, a consultation with a *jurubaya* is performed.

Loudspeakers from the mosque called on residents to pray together at Haul Kalembak. However, only a few people showed up. Rituals include the recitation of prayers and *tahlil*. The elders retell the Krakatoa disaster stories before reading the prayers and *tahlil*. Following the prayer, the buffalo's head was thrown into the middle of the Sunda Strait by a small boat pulled by a large ship. Following that, everyone present ate together. *Jejongkong* and *jejorong*, Krakatoa's symbols, are served as food. This activity was previously enlivened by *dangdutan* events, puppet shows, *patingtung* arts, etc.

Haul Kalembak is considered an act of *shirk* (an act that equates to something other than Allah) because it floats a buffalo's head. A floating buffalo head is considered a sacrifice to the sea's ruler. The previous tradition took place in the late 1990s or early 2000s. Several community groups attempted to resurrect the Haul Kalembak ritual in 2006 but were barred for violating religious teachings[19].

There is also an accommodation effort between religion and culture through creative creation by doing renewal. One of them was the nyalin ritual, which was last held in Karawang West Java in 2019. Nyalin is derived from the term salin, which means to substitute. Nyalin is a tradition of replacing seeds by taking the best rice grains as seeds for the next growing season. The place is the area plant to be harvested. The Nyalin traditional Ceremony aims to realize the balance between humans and nature so that humans, in this case, farmers, express gratitude for the blessings and fortune bestowed by God. In the nyalin procession, incense sticks and various types of food are offered to Dewi Sri. In addition, the nyalin ceremony is part of an effort to preserve Sundanese cultural arts, so they do not disappear in time. At that Time, there was resistance from the community regarding the use of offerings. Finally, the term "nyalin" (copy) was replaced with "nyisihan" (allowance). The change is not only in the name, but the ritual procession and materials used have also changed. The implementation of rituals that used to be communal has shifted to be individualized by the owners of the paddy fields.

Cultural actors also carry out adjustment patterns in the ruwat laut ritual in South Lampung. Lampung people call the ritual *ngumbai lawok* (washing the sea). One of the most critical events in this ruwat laut is to float a buffalo head as an offering or tribute to the ruler of the sea to provide safety and abundant sustenance to fishermen and other types of work closely related to the sea. Efforts to find compromises are made so that the tradition remains sustainable. The ruwat laut is turned into syukuran laut in South Lampung. The name change also replaces rituals that are considered contrary to Islamic teachings. The ritual of floating the buffalo's head is replaced by cutting the goat. Rituals are still practised and even developed, but the values have changed. Rituals do not just focus on ancestors or call for loyalty to ancestors; instead, it is directed toward Islamic teachings [20].

3.2 Searching for a Religion-Culture Relationship Model

The pattern of religious and cultural relations in some of the cases above can be placed on an understanding of the internalization of Islam into the archipelago. Islam has never been easier to understand in Indonesia. Indonesian Islam differs from religious practices elsewhere, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. According to Lombard, Islam in Indonesia has contact with pre-Islamic beliefs (animism, Hinduism, Buddhism), which coexist with the Islam that came [21].

Martin van Bruinessen [22] strengthens the thesis that Islam in Java is a thin layer that is not essentially the same as the transcendentalism of Islamic law orientation in the Middle East. Clifford Geertz [23] distinguishes the religious behaviour of Javanese Muslims into *santri*, *abangan*, and *priyayi*. Koentjaraningrat [24] divides Javanese Islam into two, namely syncretic Javanese Islam and Puritan Javanese Islam (*santri*). The adherents of syncretic Islam are less obedient to Shari'ah and are syncretic, which unites elements of pre-Hinduism, Hinduism, and Islam. While puritan Islam is more obedient in carrying out the teachings of Islam. However, although they are not as thick as the followers of Syncretic Javanese Islam, the followers of Santri Islam are also still influenced by animism, dynamism, and Hindu-Buddhist.

Parekh [25] differentiates five types of multiculturalism. First, there is isolationist multiculturalism, in which people from various cultural groups live independently and interact with one another. Second, accommodative multiculturalism is defined as a society with a dominant culture that makes certain adjustments and accommodations to meet the cultural needs of minorities. Third, autonomous multiculturalism is defined as a plural society in which the dominant cultural groups seek equality with the dominant culture and desire autonomy within a politically acceptable political framework. Fourth, there is critical/interactive multiculturalism, which refers to a plural society in which cultural groups are not overly focused on autonomous cultural life but instead form a collective creation that reflects and affirms their distinct perspective. Fifth, there is cosmopolitan multiculturalism, a plural society that seeks to completely erase cultural boundaries to create a society where each individual is no longer bound to a particular culture but relatively freely engaged in intercultural experiments while developing their own cultural life.

Some of the cases that occurred above can be analyzed in the context of this type of multiculturalism. Examining some of the cases above, some people's understanding is still at the level of isolationist multiculturalism towards accommodative multiculturalism. The available dialogue space makes it possible to get closer to each other. On the one hand, there is

a need to revitalize rituals in the context of the practical needs of society; on the other hand, there is an expansion of religious meaning in understanding rituals. Rituals are considered to have value for society and require continuous renewal. Good traditional values deserve to be maintained, and harmful traditions must be renewed to be more aligned with the spirit of religious moderation.

Given that the cultural actors associated with the three rituals are also Muslim, it is crucial to develop values of inclusivity—awareness of the need to internalize the spirit of religious moderation. Religious moderation can be understood as a creative effort to develop a religious attitude amidst the pressure of constraints, such as between claims of absolute truth and subjectivity, between literal interpretation and arrogant rejection of spiritual teachings, as well as between radicalism and secularism. Thus, religious moderation is a middle way in religious diversity in Indonesia. Moderation is an archipelago culture that goes hand in hand, not negating religion and local wisdom and not contradicting each other but seeking a tolerant solution [26].

Efforts to put forward the positive values of a ritual must continue to be voiced. In the case of Haul Kalembak, offerings thrown into the sea can become *rumpon* (an artificial reef made by humans with the purpose of being a gathering place for fish). Fish become sustainable because there are new *rumpon* in the sea. Haul Kalembak has strategic and cultural significance. When Anak Krakatau continues to build itself and has the potential to cause even greater disasters, the collective memory of possible disasters in the future should continue to be connected. This ritual becomes a mnemonic device (a reminder tool) that, in the future, there may be a great disaster that might happen the same way. The loss of the substance of values in the Kalembak ritual causes this tradition to fade. Many meanings can be interpreted in the haul tradition kalembak tradition. Preserving the memory of the 1883 tsunami disaster is reflected in every prayer offered during the haul kalembak tradition.

The *nyalin* ritual also has deep cultural significance. Apart from being a kind of cultural ethic before starting farming, this ritual has the meaning of preserving the environment. When modernization destroys the quality of the environment, cultural values take care of nature. Choose the best seeds for the next planting. This activity is also encouraged to become rural tourism to provide knowledge to the younger generation.

Likewise, with *ruwat laut* that have undergone modifications. This ritual is no longer a sacred ceremony but emphasizes the close relationship between humans (fishermen) and the sea, their source of income. It has even been developed into a tourism promotion that educates the public.

The dialogue space needs to be carried out intensely to develop cultural meaning and the spirit of religious moderation. The dynamics in the perspective of the people who see rituals are not just mythical behaviour; but sociologically, culturally, and economically. Renewal of local culture is needed in carrying out cultural acculturation to find a point of harmony in society. Rituals must be maintained to promote culture without losing the direction and meaning of the ritual. The Document on the Main Thoughts of Regional Culture (PPKD) as a strategic foundation for advancing culture has recommended a space for dialogue between stakeholders. What is needed now is a concern for preserving cultural heritage to remain sustainable. Community leaders, religious instructors, and cultural activists are at the forefront of providing education and internalization about cultural preservation in religious moderation.

4 Conclusions

The mutual influence between religion and local culture is a dynamic process that sometimes manifests in syncretic patterns, conflicts, or other patterns. Tensions between religion and culture in preserving local culture frequently arise due to perceptions that differ from their respective understandings.

The case of cultural and religious perception tensions in *Ruwatan Laut*, *Nyalin,* and *Haul Kalembak* rituals demonstrates that there are patterns of accommodation and conflict that result in different cultural statuses. Some are still developing, surviving, and on the verge of extinction. In order to preserve the culture, all parties, particularly stakeholders, should be concerned about recurring tensions. A dialogic preservation model will help reduce tensions between cultural actors and religious circles.

Cultural dialogue and religious perceptions are not understood as established but as a process of becoming. Therefore, this research has the limitation of only capturing a synchronic picture of the present. A diachronic approach is necessary to complete our understanding of the development of dialogue in overcoming cultural tensions and religious perceptions. Cultural and religious dialogue can encourage social cohesiveness toward national integration between various components of society.

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