

The construction of ethnoreligious identity among Muslims and Christians in Rote Ndao Regency, Indonesia

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Abstract

There has been much research on the violent conflict in interactions between ethnic and religious communities in Indonesia. However, there is a noticeable gap in research focusing on how people can live harmoniously across these divides. This paper aims to explore the construction of ethnoreligious identity in Christian-Islamic encounters in Rote Ndao Regency, Indonesia. The fundamental question underlying this research is how the socio-historical and cultural backdrop contributes to forming 'Rote Islam' as an ethnoreligious identity and how processes of interaction, negotiation, and integration shape social interactions between Christians and Muslims. The research employs an ethnographic and phenomenological approach incorporating observations,

interviews, participation, and literature studies to achieve this. The findings indicate that as an ethnoreligious identity, 'Rote Islam' is constructed from a process of interaction and social practice (collaborative) that has gone beyond religious and cultural boundaries. Examples of these practices include the gifting of land, the transformation of kinship through marriage, the transfer of technology, the tradition of kissing noses, the *Kebalai* dance, the celebration of religious holidays, and the identification of Leo, all of which illustrate the processes described in this study.

Banyak penelitian telah dilakukan mengenai konflik kekerasan dalam interaksi antara komunitas etnis dan agama di Indonesia. Namun, masih terdapat gap dalam penelitian tentang bagaimana mereka dapat hidup harmonis di tengah perbedaan etnik dan agama tersebut. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk melihat konstruksi identitas etnoreligius dalam pertemuan Kristen-Islam di Rote Ndao. Pertanyaan inti yang mendasari penelitian ini adalah bagaimana latar belakang sosio-historis dan budaya berkontribusi dalam membentuk 'Islam Rote' sebagai identitas etnoreligius dan bagaimana proses interaksi, negosiasi, dan integrasi membentuk interaksi sosial antara pemeluk Kristen dan Muslim. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan etnografis dan fenomenologis yang melibatkan observasi, wawancara, partisipasi, dan studi literatur. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa sebagai identitas etnoreligius, Islam Rote terbentuk dari proses interaksi dan praktik sosial (kolaboratif) yang telah melampaui batas-batas agama dan budaya. Contoh-contoh praktik ini termasuk pemberian tanah, transformasi kekerabatan melalui pernikahan, transfer teknologi, tradisi mencium hidung, tarian kebalai, perayaan hari raya agama, dan identifikasi Leo, yang semuanya menggambarkan proses yang dijelaskan dalam penelitian ini.

Keywords: *Rote Islam, Christianity, Identity construction, Ethnoreligious identity, Negotiation, Integration.*

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Introduction

During President Jokowi's administration in the 2014-2019 period, a unique phenomenon was the appointment of Saleh Husen, who comes from Rote Island, as Minister of Industry (Liau, 2014). This phenomenon occurs because the name, surname and religion adopted by Saleh Husen identify with an Islamic background, while Rote itself has always been identified with Christianity and its unique culture (Rote Ndao District Government, 2017). The unique phenomenon above is an interesting study to carry out because it reveals a reality that is different from what is often understood by the public, that Rote is not only synonymous with Rote ethnicity and Christianity but also with Muslim migrant ethnic groups who already exist and live side by side with the Rote ethnic group in harmony over a long period of history.

This research focuses on the ethnoreligious identity of 'Rote Islam' in the context of the Rote Ndao region which is constructed through work relations, marriage, kinship, customs and interpersonal relationships. The fundamental question underlying this research is first, what are the historical process and sociological dynamics of constructing 'Rote Islam' as an ethnoreligious identity in the context of the Rote Ndao Regency? Second, how does 'Rote Islam' as an ethnoreligious identity express and maintain its uniqueness as an identity in the context of the multicultural Rote Ndao society with all its social dynamics? Starting from these two questions, the main aim of this research in general is to see and describe the historical reality and development of the diverse Muslim migrant ethnic group with the Christian Rote ethnic group and to discover and present the construction of the 'Rote Islam' identity which emerged as a result of the interaction between them.

Despite being a minority (Anon, 1964:304), demographically, Muslims in Rote Ndao who historically come from ethnic backgrounds of Buton, Bajo, Kalidupa, Solor, Bima, Java, Madura and Alor have lived side by side with ethnic Roteans who are Christians for a long time. In the process of social

interaction that occurs, the current generation of Muslims has identified themselves as Rote people who are Muslim. Meanwhile, Ba'a, Oelaba, Papela, Oeseli, which are the basis of the Rote Islam community, are the places for research on Rote Islam which emerged and was constructed as a result of interactions between the Muslim migrant ethnic group referred to and the Rote ethnic group in Rote Ndao Regency.

Referring to Weber's sociological approach which questions epistemology (social reality) and ontology (construction of social reality) (Schroeder, 2002:vii), it is interesting to observe that people in the Rote area who have different ethnicities and religions interact with each other in harmony. This interaction had been going well for quite a long time before the independence of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. The interactions between ethnicities, religions and cultures are then constructed into a new identity, where when they interact with outside society they always prioritize their identity as 'Rote people' rather than other identities (Pandie, Pandie, & Selan, 2023).

There has not been much research related to the construction of ethnoreligious identity in the context of the Rote Ndao area. In Philipus Tule's view, at the level of academic studies, the existence of the Islamic religion is somewhat neglected because there is still very little study and publication about it, even though they have lived in the NTT region since the 16th century. They can survive together with the majority of NTT people who are multi-ethnic and Catholic and Christian in carrying out and developing national and local cultures (Doeka & Atang, 2018:v).

Harmonization of life between religious communities is well established so that there is no friction or conflict because the kinship factor formed in interactions between ethnicities and religions becomes the social glue that glues social harmony in society. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that several related studies have been carried out in the context of Rote Ndao. Regarding

the historicity, migration and existence of Islam in Rote, a dissertation written by Wilson MA Therik entitled "Relations between Religion and State in Rote" explains that the development of Islam in Rote began in the 1920s, marked by the construction of the An-Nur Mosque in Ba' which has a three-tiered roof architecture that is similar to the mosque in the city of Makassar, which is the area of origin of the Bajo and Butonese ethnic groups who make their living as traders and fishermen. They then spread throughout the Rote Ndao area and the most prominent villages were in Papela (East Rote), Oelaba (Northwest Rote), apart from Ba'a (Therik, 2016:167).

However, in the research conducted by James. J. Fox entitled "Notes on the Southern Voyages and Settlements of the Sama Bajau" found that the existence of Islam in Rote actually began at the beginning of the 16th century when the Bajo and Butonese ethnic groups from Sulawesi carried out trade transactions in sea products in the form of tripang, lola and shellfish (Fox, 1977). This research was then strengthened in research conducted by Lintje Pellu with the title "A Bit of the Story of Muslims in Rote Ndao", which stated that traces of the arrival of Islam had occurred since the 16th century (Doeka & Atang 2018). Other research on Rote Ndao and its ins and outs has also been carried out by Desi Puspitasari and Christy Pratiwi who highlighted the belis traditions of the Rote community in two different villages and did not mention interfaith marriages (Fanda, Daga, & Syamsuriadi 2018; Puspitasari, 2016). Meanwhile, James Fox has repeatedly researched Rote and its ins and outs, but none of his research has touched on the religious relations and interactions that occur on Rote Island. Fox discussed more Rote culture, the traditional house of the Rote people (Fox, 2003), Rote people's agriculture, Rote language, Rote nature (Fox, 1996), the legal system of the Rote community (Fox, 2007), genealogy of the Rote people (Fox, 2000), and Rote Community Rituals (Fox, 1983).

Regarding identity construction, Manuel Castells' concept will be used as a reference theoretical framework. Castells' main context is a network society that is in a state of flux. Castells then categorized identity construction into three forms, namely legitimizing identity, resistance identity and project identity (Prasetyo & Irwansyah, 2020). Legitimizing identity is carried out by dominant institutions in society to rationalize and expand dominance when dealing with social actors. Resistance identity is the opposite of legitimizing identity because it is initiated by actors who are in a position of being stigmatized and oppressed by the logic of ruling institutions.

Meanwhile, project identity is the stage where social identity is transformed in the social process. Social actors begin to form new identities to re-identify and formulate identities in society. In connection with the project identity stated above by Castells, Berger, and Luckmann, they are of the view that social construction is a reality that is formed through social processes that are realized through actions and interactions in which individuals and groups are in continuous subjective dialectic. Once this process takes shape, it will be maintained, and modified in subsequent social relations and interactions. This process is formed, maintained and then reshaped by social structures. On the one hand, society has a history that, in the social process, gives rise to new identities, which, on the other hand, are formed by actors with new identities (Berger & Luckman, 2012:14).

It is hoped that this research will be one of the results of a study on the social construction of a multi-ethnic society in the Rote Ndao Regency area with its religious differences. Likewise, the objective condition of society in the areas mentioned above, as a community consisting of ethnic and religious diversity, is expected to become a model for the interaction of Indonesian society that can live in harmony, peace and mutual respect between friends and neighbours, between villages and regions. , as well as between ethnic groups

with different religious understandings and become part of local wisdom (Ahmad, 2013:18).

Islam enters rote and rote enters Islam: migration and interaction

Based on the origins of Muslims in the East Nusa Tenggara region, the existence of Islam on the island of Rote is categorized as part related to sailors, traders and fishermen who came from Arabia, Java, Sumatra, Bajo, Bima, as well as Bugis, Buton, and Makassar (Doeka & Atang 2018:36-37). They are spread from the coastal areas of Manggarai, Ngada, Mbay, Ende, Sikka and small islands such as Pakara, Kalabahi Alor, Kupang and Rote (Junaedi, 2016). So when and why did Islam come to the East Nusa Tenggara region?

According to I. H Doko, since the 12th century, the island of Timor has been famous for its sandalwood which became an attraction for Chinese brothers, Hindu Javanese from Majapahit, and then Muslim traders from Makassar and Gujarat to trade (Doko, 1981:40). However, there are no historical records that show that these Muslim traders settled and attempted to expand Islamic influence in the Timor region. It was only in the 16th century that Muslims settled and then expanded the influence of Islam in the Timor region (Martin, 1979). However, more successful Islamization on the island of Timor only took place a century later, both by Islamic pioneers from Solor, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Java, Bangka, and from Bengal (India). AK Goro said that in 1749, the Dutch brought in Atu Laganama who came from Solor and was Muslim to help the Dutch in their struggle against the Portuguese (Goro, 1977:78). The arrival of Atu Laganama marked the first migration of Solor Muslims to Kupang and to this day there is a sub-district called 'Kampung Solor' in the Kupang City area (Murtadlo, 2018).

The existence of Islam in the Rote Ndao region began with the arrival of sailors from Sulawesi in the 16th century due to trade. Geographically, Rote Island is located close to Australia, specifically, Pasir Island (Grandpa, 2023),

which was the aim of the sailors looking for marine resources in the form of sea cucumbers and lola which had a high selling value at that time for trading. The Pasir Island group is closer to Rote Island (60 nautical miles) than Australia/Darwin which is 500 nautical miles away. For hundreds of years, fishermen from Rote, Alor, Sabu, Flores, Bugis, Buton and Madura have made a living there. On Pasir Island there are still 161 ancestral graves of the Rote people today, coconut trees and wells as well as traces of Rote people's activities. In 1605, the Dutch East Indies government imposed regulations regarding the collection of sea cucumbers and other marine biota for local fishermen and Chinese fishermen who came to Pasir Island via Makassar (Amnifu, 2022). As the closest island to Pasir Island, Rote Island is not only a stopover for traders but also for economic transactions and religious contacts with the residents of Rote Island. In the words of Arnolus Mooy, one of the Maneleo Taratu in Oeseli Nusak Thie:

“Our parents told us about how Oeseli village used to be a stopover place for people from Kupang, from Alor, from Sulawesi, even from China. They stopped to get clean water and food. When they stopped, Oeseli Beach became busy because many people had gathered there. There was bartering of goods between them and the Oeseli residents. Apart from that, some of the people who stopped by had affairs with girls from Oeseli who then gave birth to children without being married. Some of their descendants today can be seen from their physical characteristics which are different from most Oeseli people. Nevertheless, they are still part of us” (Anon, 2022).

In the subsequent historical process, local culture and external influences have enriched the encounter between Islam and Christianity in Rote. Islam, introduced by migrants from Sulawesi, Java, and Bima, has assimilated into local traditions. Similarly, Christianity, shaped by European colonialism, has adapted to Rote's cultural landscape.

Migration to Rote was multifaceted, driven by political pressures, environmental challenges, technological advancements, and economic opportunities. The descendants of Daeng Tonto, for instance, migrated due to

Dutch colonial demands, assisting in the control of Timor for the Dutch. Ecological factors, such as persistent drought, also played a role in migration patterns. The Butonese, renowned for their seafaring prowess and distinctive "Lambo" ships, have a long history of navigating the archipelago's waters, reflecting their maritime heritage (Tahara & Rusli, 2019; Hooridge, 1978:9). Economic factors are one of the motives for ethnic Muslim migrants to come to Rote Island. Water sugar (Lontar Syrup) and Areca nut fruit were among the important reasons Muslim traders started trade relations with the Rote people. Water sugar, produced in abundance by the people of Rote at that time, had a high selling value and became an important trade product (Fox, 2007).

Negotiation and integration

Rote Ndao society represents a structure that includes various social categories consisting of ethnicity, religion, occupation, gender and so on. Referring to Giddens' theory, the identity construction of 'Rote Islam' is the product of a negotiation process between actors and social situations or external forces that conflict with each other (Giddens, 2003:44). Meanwhile, referring to Castells, Rote Islam's identity is an identity construction that uses material buildings from history, geography, biology, production and reproduction, collective memory, power and religious teachings (Junaedi, 2016).

Based on the concept of thought above, as an ethnoreligious identity, 'Rote Islam' is fundamental for interactions between Muslim migrant ethnic groups and Rote ethnic groups, in which a change in the orientation of each ethnicity and religion is constructed into an "other identity" as a social object. According to Brown, there are three dimensions in the identity construction of 'Rote Islam', namely primordialism, situationalism and constructionism (Brown, 2000:43). These three dimensions are dialectically related. Primordial criteria are obtained by the Muslim migrant ethnic group and the Rote ethnic group genetically, inherited from their parents and ancestors who inherently carry

original identities such as Bugis, Buton, Makassar, Javanese, Bima, Alor, Bajo, Solor and Rote. This primordial identity is inherent in inheritance.

The situational dimension refers to the identities formed in the situational context of the Rote Ndao region as "Nusak" where they interact with each other. Meanwhile, constructionism sees the identity of 'Rote Islam' as a social category that is reconstructed through a process of negotiation and social integration. From Berger & Luckman's perspective, 'Rote Islam' is not a given identity, but occurs through concrete and specific interactions, the result of a negotiation and interaction process that requires "discursive work" (Hartono, 1991:23). Attachments to a place of residence, collective memory, history, language and culture have become inherent ascriptive factors for all ethnicities and religions in the context of the Rote Ndao region.

Installing the outsider inside transforming kinship and culture

Kinship relations in the context of communities with different ethnicities and religions are not easy. However, kinship relations through marriage and marriage have become firmly entrenched as the foundation of kinship between ethnicities and religions in the Rote Ndao context and have become a supporting factor for harmony and harmony. In Haji Hassan's story, their ancestor Daeng Baco married King Ndao's son, but later divorced. He then married the daughter of the king of Oenale at that time and brought down relatives who lived in Oelaba. Daeng Baco's descendants who were in Ndao then moved to Oeseli in the Nusak Thie area. That is why in Haji Hasan's story, eighty percent of Muslims in Oeseli are descendants of Daeng Baco. The next migration was from Buton, Wakatobi, Wanci, Kalidupa Tomea and Binongko who were looking for marine products. Their intermarriage with local ethnic groups has produced descendants who now live in Oelaba. In the context of the Muslim community in Papela, Darso Arie Bakuama tells the story:

"In Papela, our ancestors who came to trade and search for marine products then settled and married women from the Rote ethnicity. This is one way of spreading the word as it happened in the spread of Islam in various places in the archipelago. Through this method, there are also several ethnic Roteans from the families of the women they marry who decide to convert to Islam and embrace Islam as their religion. My grandfather was one of the converts whose name was Oktovianus Bakuama. After converting to Islam, he changed his name to Akhirudin Bakuama. Ten years before he died, my grandfather immortalized himself as the Doja (Marbot) of Al Muhajirin Mosque, whose name has now been changed to Al Babri Mosque" (Darson, 2023)

Marriages between ethnic migrants and local Rote ethnic groups have led to the blending of bloodlines and the transformation of kinship structures, fostering alliances across ethnic and religious lines. Local Christians have welcomed migrants into their socio-cultural spaces, and migrants have embraced local ethnicity and Christianity to strengthen social ethics (D. A. Pandie & Pandie, 2023). Inter-ethnic and religious marriages have created new social metaphors, including in physical characteristics. Despite some migrants retaining ancestral features, they identify as Rote. Negotiations within these marriages have resulted in new identities (Toomey, 1999: 40). Social solidarity has shifted, with relatives now defined beyond ethnic and religious boundaries, influencing attitudes and solidarity (Pandie, 2018). In Rote Ndao, mutual respect between Muslims and Christians is evident in relaxed customary rules to maintain harmony. Muslims tolerate the presence of pigs for Christians, and Christians accommodate Muslim dietary restrictions at gatherings, showcasing a reciprocal relationship (Pandie, 2021).

Grant of land, technology transfer and cultural integration

The economic activities and livelihood orientation of the Rote ethnic group are farming on dry land, planting irrigated rice, gardening, animal husbandry, fishing, seaweed farming and tapping sap from palm trees which grow abundantly and thrive in almost all areas of Rote Ndao district. On the other

hand, the economic activities and livelihoods of ethnic Muslim migrants in Oelaba, Ba'a, Papela and Oeseli are traders and fishermen looking for marine products not only in the waters of the Rote region but also in eastern Indonesia, and even Australia. In the interaction process between the Muslim migrant ethnic group and the Christian Rote ethnic group, a negotiation process occurs, including land, technology, customs, livelihoods and interpersonal relationships through various agreement mechanisms. In terms of land, for decades, the ruling Manek in Oelaba, Papela, Ba'a, Batutua and Oeseli together with traditional elders agreed to accept the arrival of ethnic Muslim migrants and agreed to grant land to them to settle.

In the Oeseli area, Rote Barat Daya District, Manek Thie and the Maneleo agreed to grant Nembadale, a coastal area of Oeseli, to settle ethnic migrants. Ethnic Muslim migrants are also allowed to build places of worship (mosques) as places for them to carry out their worship. However, ethnic migrants are only given the right to settle while ownership is still within the authority of the meneleo as customary land. Currently, in Nembadale Oeseli, most Muslims live and carry out their livelihood activities as traders and fishermen. The Meneleo and Oeseli traditional leaders gave land to ethnic Muslim migrants from the start of their settlement without asking for anything in return, which shows a good relationship in the interaction process. Ethnic Muslim migrants in Oeseli have established good relations with the native Rote ethnic group in Oeseli in the economic field, where there is a transfer of technology between them and the local ethnic group. The Rote ethnic group learned boat-making techniques from ethnic migrants, who sold agricultural products in the form of livestock and agricultural products, which were then taken and sold to Kupang. The relationships that were built then helped improve the economic development of the Oeseli village community and created close social and economic relationships. In Oelaba, North West Rote District, which is a residential area for ethnic Muslim migrants, the Manek

Dengka also openly welcome the arrival of these ethnic migrants to settle. Since their initial arrival in the 16th century, Muslim migrants and their descendants have had no ownership claims to any land. However, it is different from Oeseli, because at the time of independence, Manek Dengka and the Maneleo gave land and trees that grew on that land to followers of Islam (Pandie, 2021).

Land and trees donated by Manek Dengka to Muslim migrants

Date	Grant Type	Manek Dengka's name
March 23, 1955	Land for Mosque	Benjamin F. Tunga
May 2, 1961	108 Coconut Trees and 79 Palm Trees	Christophe A Tunga
November 25, 1961	Land for Housing	Christophe A Tunga

Source: Document signed by Manek Dengka and 80 families in 1961

In 1955, Muslims in Oelaba were granted land by Manek Dengka to build a mosque, which stands on waqf land managed by the Rote Ndao Regency Religious Office. Muslim migrants and Rote locals have interacted economically and through technology transfer, with migrants sharing knowledge on farming and trade. This has led to some Rote people adopting new livelihoods as traders and fishermen, a change acknowledged and respected by the Oelaba community. The integration process includes marriages, land grants, and the exchange of livelihoods and technology (Isaacs, 1993:95).

The integration process, which is also the focus of this research, is the phenomenon of cultural values brought by ethnic Muslim migrants in Rote Ndao who have experienced contact with local culture. Enga Lai, one of the descendants of ethnic Muslim migrants who lives in Oeseli, said:

"One of the traditions brought by our ancestors from Buton which is integrated with Rote culture is the art of li butu which is a combination of Buton silat and Rote silat accompanied by gongs and dances which are usually held at traditional weddings or death parties. In the Rote language, the word li means the sound of a gong (meko) being beaten, and butu is what the Rote people call the Butonese people" (Lai, 2023).

In the social interactions that exist between Muslims and Christians in Rote Ndao, several Rote Ndao traditional customs are accepted by one another which show cultural integration and religious patterns, including the traditions of nose kissing, dancing and Leo identification. Likewise in the tradition of "kissing the nose". For other ethnic communities, this tradition may be considered strange, but for the Rote community in particular, nose kissing has a different meaning, namely as a sign of closeness and brotherhood (Pandie, 2023). Philosophically, Isaiah Mooy said that the nose is a breathing apparatus and a symbol of life. Rote people interpret nose kissing as a symbol of a sense of kinship and brotherhood between family members and with other people they meet for the first time. In various meetings related to customs and religion, nose kissing is carried out regardless of gender, status, age and social strata (Mooy, 2023).

Among Rote Muslims, several opinions are against the tradition of nose kissing, especially those who have only migrated to Rote in the last few decades. However, the majority of Muslims in Rote have accepted this tradition as part of their cultural traditions. Nose kissing is something that is commonly done by fellow Muslims and Christians when interacting in meetings, especially during religious celebrations such as Christmas, Eid al-Fitr and in traditional gatherings related to marriage or death. Masri Lawoe said:

"As Rote Muslims, we accept nose kissing as a cultural tradition. In my opinion, this does not conflict with Islamic teachings, because it is not related to lust, but is a sign of closeness and brotherhood. Kissing the nose is also a sign of sincere apology to the other person. "In celebrating Eid al-Fitr, saying min al-'aidin wal faiẓin is always accompanied by kissing the child's nose to parents and fellow friends." (Lawoe, 2023).

In the field of arts, the people of Rote know the Keblai dance which in the Rote language is called *kebak*, *heka* or *kaule*. Keblai is a dance that is performed by holding hands and rotating regularly accompanied by the song of the dance leader called manehelo who recites poetry or a kind of rhyme in the

Rote language and is followed by the Keblai dance participants. When performing the Keblai dance, the dance participants move and spin in harmony with the rhythm and speech of the manehelo.

Religious conversion

Even though they come from the same ancestor (Abrahamic religion), with the same roots, in their development, Islam and Christianity have often been at odds for a long time, so that attitudes of mutual suspicion have become barriers that often separate adherents of these two religions. Different from the context in Rote Ndao, the current generation, both Muslims and Christians, generally have kinship relationships that enable them to live side by side and interact in harmony and peace. Despite being a statistical minority, the establishment of Muslim houses of worship has never experienced resistance from the Christian community as has happened in other regions in Indonesia, where Islam is the majority. In the cultural aspect, the Christian community in Rote is different from the reality of the Christian community in Madura as researched by Akmad Siddiq, that the Madurese Muslim community has made Islam their cultural identity so they view Christianity as a threat to them, both ideologically and in the public sphere (Siddiq, 2023). Muslims in Rote are open and internalize Rote cultural values and express them as a religious identity.

Religious conversion, whether from Christianity to Islam or from Islam to Christianity, is not responded to in a frontal and excessive manner as occurs in communities characterized by the dominance of the majority religion. The terms "apostate" or "heretic sheep" as a result of religious conversion are rarely uttered in public conversations in public spaces. Chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council of Rote Ndao Regency, Ahmad Kosso, explained that the condition of Islam as a minority must be able to harmonize with the majority religion. Changing religions should not only be seen haphazardly in terms of quantity and ignoring the quality of piety (Kosso, 2023). Chairman of the

Southwest Rote Classis of the GMIT Synod, Reverend Tony Nalle also explained that the phenomenon of religious conversion occurred several times in the Southwest Rote classis area, such as in Batutua and Oeseli, but the church did not overreact to this phenomenon because Christianity gives freedom to people to embrace religion according to their beliefs. Moreover, conversions often occur through marriages where their kinship is still very close (Nalle, 2023).

Among the people of Rote, there is a kind of reluctance to mention the name of someone who is married. For this reason, a person's name is usually called according to the name of their first child. Mama Vira Amalo, one of the daughters of Manek Amalo, in 1978 chose to embrace Islam following her husband, Husen Laba, a migrant from Ende on Flores Island who came abroad and then settled in Rote. Her name was later changed to Halimah. Mama Vira said:

"At first my parents didn't agree with me changing religions because my extended family were all Christians. But because my future husband had come and asked nicely, my parents slowly accepted and gave their blessing for me to get married and change religion to follow my husband. After marriage, relations with the family all continued as usual. We often visit family at Christmas or if there is an event such as a wedding or death. Katong have different religions, but they are both Rote people. My husband also uses fam Laba like the Rote people. Two of my sons-in-law also converted to Islam when they married my two daughters. Our relationship is still going well." (Vira, 2023).

Something that is not much different from Mama Vira's story is as told by Mama Theo. Born into a Muslim family, she was given the name Siti Khadijah by her Muslim parents but later converted to Christianity after marrying Papa Theo (Doris Ndun). Mama Theo said that:

"I was born into a Muslim family. Like Muslims, I also observe prayers, fasting and other Islamic teachings. After growing up and going to school in Kupang, I met Papa Theo and started a relationship. Because I felt suitable, I decided to marry Papa Theo and follow his religion. When I told my parents, at first they didn't agree. Moreover, no one agreed with Papa and the extended

family from Solor, only Mama accepted this from the start. But after going through the proposal process by Papa Theo's family, his parents also allowed it. As for the name, there is no change, just an addition to the family" (Ndun, 2023).

From a sociological perspective, the religious conversion that occurs in the Rote Ndao community is not carried out as a form of denigration of the previous religion, but rather because of spiritual factors, environmental factors and affection factors towards one's life partner. Looking at this phenomenon, the author believes that this should be used as a model and response to religious conversion events that often occur in interactions between different religions to maintain fraternal relations and harmony between religious communities.

Interpersonal relations

In the Rote Oeseli community, there is an interesting tradition that describes the process of negotiation and social integration in Christian-Islamic encounters. Migel Mooy said:

"The Muslim family in Nembadale Oeseli is a family that is inseparable from us even though they are of different religions. During the Eid al-Fitr celebration, our parents taught us to go downstairs to visit our family in Nembadale by bringing a goat or several free-range chickens and then having them slaughtered by our Muslim family and together we processed the meat to be enjoyed together. Likewise, during Christmas celebrations, our Muslim family from Nembadale went upstairs and celebrated Christmas together with us. There is no distance that separates us even though we have different religions."(Mooy, 2023).

Zakiya Aryana and Ashela Risa are two Muslim frontline teachers who carry out their duties in the Oekoko and Oeseli village areas, telling their experiences related to the social interaction process of the Muslim and Christian Oeseli village community. Zakiya described his experience in Oeseli as follows:

"Celebrating Ramadhan at Oeseli feels so warm. The family feel, friendly neighbors made me feel at peace even though I was far from my family in Java.

Like Muslims in Java, there is a takbiran followed by Eid prayers at the mosque in Nembedale. During Eid al-Fitr, there is a tradition of "cutting chicken" which is prepared by Christian families and then cooked and eaten together. There was a kind of thanksgiving on the beach held by the Muslim residents of Nembadale by inviting the village head and his officials as well as families from above who were Christians. The celebration becomes even busier with the Kebalai dance. All residents dance with joy to celebrate Eid" (Kusumadewi, 2017).

The reality of social interaction described above shows that when people in other communities are busy debating religious arguments and then creating segregation between one group and another, the people in Rote Ndao can live in tolerance, togetherness, peace and brotherhood. In the researcher's observations, the social interaction that is built between the Muslim-Christian community in Oeseli is carried out through intensive social assistance and religious relations, not only during religious holiday celebrations but also in marriage and death traditions. The Christian community's friendship with their Muslim relatives is a form of expression of their social needs as family members which are constructed in the context of Oeseli which contains diversity.

One of the interesting phenomena in the Christian community's friendship with Muslim relatives in Nembadale Oeseli is the presence of the Siloam Oeseli church administrators who have become a symbol of the social elite among Christians. The spirit of building friendship in maintaining harmony and peace between Muslims and Christians was emphasized by Rev. Chrisanti Mbau from GMIT Siloam Oeseli Congregation said:

"To maintain harmonious and peaceful relations between religious communities, I invite the congregation to visit the Muslim community in Nembedale together. During these visits, I also always urge the congregation to take care of themselves so that suspicions do not arise that the church wants to carry out Christianization. After all, they are all part of the family despite their different religions" (Mbau, 2023).

In this process of social interaction, friendship is not just a religious expression but also a positive culture that builds a harmonious life between fellow religious believers. This effort is further strengthened by carrying out social activities through free health services and church diaconia for people who are not only church members, but also Muslim relatives who live in Nembedale. This condition substantially shows that diversity with all its differences can provide positive meaning for efforts to form a harmonious, peaceful and prosperous life. Diversity with all its differences is no longer something negative but is a space for all different ethnicities and religions to contribute optimally and positively. The church, which is a place of worship for Christians, in practice is not only used as a ritual facility but also a social facility for all Oeseli people regardless of ethnic and religious differences in social programs and activities organized by the Village government and the Rote Ndao Regency Government.

Becoming rote, but still Islamic: theoretical reflections

Studies on religion and culture often reference Geertz and Berger, who view religion as part of the cultural system, undergoing objectivation, internalization, and externalization. In Rote, Islam's presence and expansion from coastal to inland areas involved negotiations and cultural dynamics, leading to syncretism and acculturation. However, Rote Islam is not just syncretic or acculturative; it's a collaborative ethnoreligious, unique and diverse identity shaped by social interactions among various ethnicities and religions. This identity is a social construction, adapting to both religious and complex cultural customs, overcoming initial resistance to create a process of internalization within the socio-cultural world.

As an ethnoreligious identity, "Rote Islam" has been used as a guide and framework for interpretation in social interactions. In Geertz's view, religion is a pattern of behaviour, where religion is an important part of daily life which is

manifested in action. Religion thus becomes part of the cultural system. This action pattern is related to the evaluative system or values adopted and the human knowledge system. The relationship between patterns and systems lies in the symbols that become the meaning process carried out (Thohir, 2006:5-6).

The ethnic descendants of Muslim migrants in the process of social integration with the culture of the Rote community, referring to Geertz's concept above, are in a liminal identity, Rote people, but still Muslim. This liminality is expressed by Masri Lawoe:

"Indeed, there is Butonese, Bajo, Bugis, Makassar, Javanese blood in the Muslims of Rote as our ancestral origins. However, socially and culturally we are Rote people because we were born and raised in Rote and Rote has become Nusa Fua Funi for us today. When we were outside Rote, we introduced ourselves as Rote people, but Muslim. Not many of our current generation can speak the language according to our ancient ancestors. We speak Rote or the Rote version of Malay to communicate with each other" (Lawoe, 2023).

Statistically, the number of Muslims in Rote is not the majority. However, the existence of Islam for the people of Rote is not strange because it plays an important role in social interactions in the market, the implementation of customs and traditions, and activities organized by the government. Interactions between the religions of Islam and Christianity in daily life take place in a friendly and respectful manner, even though a diversity of social and cultural backgrounds frames these interactions. Based on observations during field research, Christian Rote people view Islamic Rote as fellow brothers who are shown in religious activities, economic activities and customs. In the religious field, awareness of respecting Rote Islam is shown by respect when Muslims are performing their worship, willingness to exchange new experiences with Rote Islam people through interaction and willingness to be involved in celebrating Islamic religious holidays.

Rote Islam as an ethnoreligious identity construction actually expresses Rote's unique Islamic characteristics, which are constructed through historical processes and the dynamics of interaction with Rote's ethnicity and culture. According to the Chairman of the MUI Rote Ndao Regency, Mr. Ahmad Koso:

"In Indonesia, Islam is not the state religion, therefore Islam must be given local meaning where the Islamic religion is present. When Islam was brought by their predecessors to Rote Island, they were aware of this so that on the one hand they still maintained the Islamic religion as their identity, but culturally Islam accommodated cultural values that did not conflict with the basic principles of Islamic teachings. If you learn from the Walisongo in Java, Islam is very tolerant and accommodating to local culture. In Rote, our predecessors were very tolerant and accommodating towards Rote culture. They adopted Rote culture selectively, the existing social, artistic and government systems did not need to be changed. As the person who is trusted to be the chairman of MUI Rote, I often act as spokesperson in the maso betta process and several other traditional events. I myself master several dialects of the Rote language which makes it easier for me to interact with the community" (Kosso, 2023).

The arrival of Rote Islam's ancestors to Rote Island from the start was not to conquer Rote, but to search for marine products and trade. However, as Muslims, it cannot be denied that they are also obliged to spread the word by recognizing the cultural rights of the local Rote ethnic group. Their strategy and way of life is proven to familiarize Islam with the local Rote ethnic group. Islam is not hostile and shunned, but can be well accepted because it is not inconsistent with local ethnic customs and traditions.

The reality above is interesting if it is related to the classification of Islamic patterns carried out by Dien Samsudin, who categorized Islam into three groups: formalistic Islam, substantive Islam and fundamentalist Islam (Syamsuddin, 1994). Referring to this category, Rote Islam emphasizes substance rather than Islamic forms and symbols. This kind of religious pattern has developed Islamic values that underline the blessing for all creation (*rahmah lil 'alamin*) in order to develop Rote Ndao Regency. As an ethnoreligious identity, Rote Islam has provided another pattern of the face of Islam which is

always identified with radicalism. Rote Islam is unique, tends to be tolerant of local culture and traditions and attempts to dialect Islamic teachings into the culture and customs of Rote.

Conclusion

'Rote Islam' as a religious identity construction is an identity that emerged from complex historical processes, interactions, and socio-geographical and socio-cultural integration in the Christian-Islam encounter in the Rote Ndao district area. 'Rote Islam' as an ethnoreligious identity construction is a strategy and solution in understanding and managing ethnic and religious diversity with all its differences rather than strategies of assimilation or political integration, which often trigger the re-emergence of conflict. Based on the agreement mechanism in marriage, which transforms kinship patterns, giving land, transferring technology and livelihoods, and cultural integration, the multicultural Rote Ndao community can live in harmony.

The results of this research recommend the construction of Rote Islam's identity as a natural laboratory for the principle of togetherness in the reality of multicultural Indonesian society. Rote Islam as an ethnoreligious identity departs from uniformity towards diversity and ends in togetherness. Rote Islam is a new "syncretism" that aims to look for "common ground" rather than "quarrel points," which often lead to "points of separation." Rote Islam as an ethnoreligious identity construction has past and present historical dimensions.

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