

The Assimilation of Islamic Culture Into Local Beliefs in The Sangihe Islands

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Abstract: *This study aims to analyze the process of cultural assimilation occurring between Islamic teachings and the local belief system of Masade in the Sangihe archipelago. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research explores how the interaction between these two religious traditions results in changes in the practices and cultural identity of the local community. The findings indicate that although the adherents of Masade are divided into three groups (Hadun, Hamadun, and Mangkung) with differing practices, they maintain harmonious relationships and mutual respect, creating a new culture that emerges from the integration of elements from both belief systems. This research highlights the importance of tolerance and adaptation in the assimilation process, as well as its impact on social diversity within the community, contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of intercultural interactions..*

Key Words: *Intercultural Interaction, Identity Formation, Social Diversity*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis proses asimilasi budaya yang terjadi antara ajaran Islam dan kepercayaan lokal Masade di kepulauan Sangihe. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana interaksi antara dua tradisi keagamaan ini menghasilkan perubahan dalam praktik dan identitas budaya masyarakat setempat. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun penganut Masade terbagi dalam tiga golongan (Hadun, Hamadun, dan Mangkung) dengan praktik yang berbeda, mereka tetap menjaga hubungan harmonis dan saling menghormati, menciptakan budaya baru yang merupakan hasil dari penggabungan elemen-elemen dari masing-masing kebudayaan. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya toleransi dan adaptasi dalam proses asimilasi, serta dampaknya terhadap keberagaman sosial di masyarakat, memberikan kontribusi pada pemahaman tentang dinamika interaksi antarbudaya.

Kata Kunci : Interaksi Antarbudaya, Pembentukan Identitas, Keberagaman Sosial

INTRODUCTION

The Sangihe Islands is one of the regions located on the border between Indonesia and the Philippines. Astronomically, Sangihe Islands Regency is located between 20 4' 13 - 40 44' 22" North latitude and 1250 9' 28" - 1250 56' 57" East longitude. Administratively, the Sangihe archipelago is included in the North Sulawesi province which has administrative boundaries including bordering the Philippines and Talaud Islands Regency to the north, with Sitaro Regency to the south, to the east bordering the Pacific Ocean and Maluku Sea, and to the west bordering the Sulawesi Sea.¹

The Sangihe archipelago geographically has several volcanoes, most of which are still active including Banuawuhu, Sandaruman, Awu and Kakiralong mountains. As the region is surrounded by volcanoes, the Sangihe archipelago has a lot of natural resources. In addition, this region also has unique fauna and flora that are different from other regions. Since the Sangihe archipelago is a group of islands, it can only be reached by using several modes of public transportation, namely ships and airplanes from the capital city of North Sulawesi province, Manado.

In a foreign record, the Sangihe archipelago is also known as Sanguin along with the following explanation by Pigafetta (1875)

*"We sailed from Sarangani, and went S.1/4 S.E., until we came opposite and island called **Sanguin**, and between the two are many islets and they are on the West side, and this island is in 3 1/4°. From Sanguin we went S.1/4 S.E. to an island called Sian; between them there are many islets and this island is in just 3°. From Sian we went to S1/4 S.W., as far as an island called Paginsara, it is in 1 and from this island to Sarangani the run is N.S JN.E. S.W. in sight of all these islands²."*

In the explanation of the travel notes, it was explained that to get to the Maluku region they had to pass through several islands, including the island of Sangihe which they mentioned as Sanguin.

In the past, the Sangihe region was known as the Sangir-Talaud region which consisted of several small islands such as Sangihe, Talaud, Nian, Siau, Tagulandang, Biaro and so on. In its development, this region experienced two separate divisions. In the first enlargement, the region was divided into two different districts, namely Sangihe district and Talaud district. Meanwhile, in the second regional division in 2007, the Sangihe archipelago was re-divided into two island districts, namely the Sangihe island district and the Siau Tagulandang Biaro island district (SITARO).

Nowadays, the Sangihe Islands Regency itself has an area of 736.98 km with a population of 139,262 people.³ The dominant population in the Sangihe Islands

¹ Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Kepulauan Sangihe, Kabupaten Sangihe Dalam Angka 2021. Diakses dari <https://sangihekab.bps.go.id/publication/2021/02/26/ebc1296a0ce248f09ebab09e/kabupaten-kepulauan-sangihe-dalam-angka-2021.html> pada tanggal 4 Maret 2022. p. 4

² Pigafetta. 1875. *First Voyage Round the World by Magellan*, Boston: The Hakluyt Society, pp. 228-229

³ Badan Pusat Statistik Kabupaten Kepulauan Sangihe, Kabupaten Sangihe Dalam Angka 2021. Diakses dari <https://sangihekab.bps.go.id/publication/2021/02/26/ebc1296a0ce248f09ebab09e/kabupaten-kepulauan-sangihe-dalam-angka-2021.html> date 4 March 2022. p. 50

Regency is the Sangihe ethnic community. Brillman (in Suwandono, 1980) stated that the Sangihe ethnic community belongs to the Indonesian ethnic group in the parent environment of the Polynesian Malay Nation which migrated from Mindano, Philippines to the Sangihe islands, Indonesia.

On the other hand, Anthropologically, the Sangihe ethnic group has physical characteristics that are almost the same as other Malays, however, this ethnic group has its own language, the Sangihe language. This language was once researched by J.C Van Erde and sorted the Sangihe language into 10 dialects, namely the Manganitu dialect, Tahuna dialect, Kendahe dialect, North Tabukan dialect, Central Tabukan dialect, South Tabukan dialect, Tamako dialect, West Siau dialect, East Siau dialect, and Tagulandang dialect.⁴ However, of the many dialects that exist, some dialects are no longer used by the Sangihe ethnic community today. According to experts, this is influenced by cultural contact between ethnic groups in Indonesia who migrated to various regions in Indonesia. Furthermore, Van Erde explained that the Sangihe language is also included in the Austronesian language group or the sub-clan of Malay languages.

Talking about the development of the Sangihe ethnic community, since the 15th century this ethnicity has begun to be recorded along with the emergence of several kingdoms in the Sangihe archipelago. Based on Dutch records and foreign explorers who visited the Sangihe region, there are several well-known kingdoms including the Tagulandang Kingdom, Siau Kingdom, Kendahe Kingdom, Kolongan Tahuna Kingdom, Manganitu Kingdom, and Tabukan Kingdom. In this case, some of these kingdoms are known to have embraced Islam, one of which is the Tabukan kingdom. However, the existence of these kingdoms was eventually lost due to various factors, including a conflict or war between the kingdoms.⁵

In terms of religion, the Sangihe islands have a variety of beliefs, including Islam, Christianity, and also a religion of belief (Masade religion) which is often referred to as Old Islam or Masade by the Sangihe people. Talking about the chronology of religious development in Sangihe, before the arrival of Islam, the Sangihe community adhered to local religions or ancestors. After that, Islam came in 1550 through two main routes of Islamization, namely through the northern route and the southeast route. In the path of Islamization originating from the northern region, Islam came from the Mindanao region and was a continuation of the Islamization of Malama, Sumatra, Brunai, Sulu and took place around 1550. While the path of Islamization originating from the southeast region, namely Islamization originating from the Ternate, Tidore, Bacan, and Ambon regions which took place around 1540 AD⁶. The people who spread Islam to the Sangihe region can be identified into three groups: the preachers who came from various Muslim regions, the traders who traded in the Sangihe region, and the scholars sent by a kingdom. In this case, the traders who introduced Islam to Sangihe came from the Middle East region today. They

⁴ Steven Sumolang. Kain Tenun Tradisional "KOFO" di Sangihe. Jakarta: Direktorat Jendral Nilai Budaya, Seni, dan Film Kementerian Kebudayaan dan Pariwisata, 2011, p. 15

⁵ Steven Sumolang,. Kain Tenun Tradisional "KOFO" di Sangihe, p.16

⁶ Paul Nabarth, Gretha Liwoso, & John Semen. Sastra Lisan Sangir Talaud. Jakarta: Pusat Pengembangan Bahasa Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1985, p. 13.

initially stopped in the archipelago to wait for the monsoon winds and then continued their trade to China or vice versa. In addition, some of these traders deliberately traded to the archipelago by visiting India first, and then heading to the archipelago. Some of them married local women and had Muslim descendants, creating a Muslim community on the coast of the Sangihe archipelago⁷.

In addition, the process of Islamization apart from traders also occurred because of the ulama who were sent to Islamize the Sangihe area. This was due to the geographical factor of the Sangihe islands, which became a transit route between two major kingdoms at that time, namely the Mindanao kingdom in the Philippines and the Ternate kingdom in the Maluku region. One of the historical evidence is the existence of a toponym that exists in the Sangihe region today, namely the Tidore-Ternate village in the coastal area of the Sangihe region near the current harbor.

Later, Christianity entered the Sangihe region a few years after the introduction of Islam. The Christianization process was marked by the arrival of the Jesuit mission led by Don Diego Magelhaens in the Kamanga area of Siau Island in 1568. The process of Christianization in Sangihe became more massive and intense when the Sangihe region was controlled by the colonial government, especially during the VOC era. After that, in the XVII century, Christianity began to spread throughout the Sangihe islands, both inland and coastal areas. According to Paul Nabarth, the spread of Christianity was more easily carried out by missionaries since it was carried out using the Sangir and Talaud languages.⁸

The encounter between Islam and the Masade faith, known as Old Islam, is an interesting phenomenon that occurred in the Sangihe archipelago more than three centuries ago. The process began with the arrival of Mawu Masade scholars who brought the teachings of Islam to the region, which previously had local religious traditions. Masade's adherents are divided into three groups, namely Hadun, Hamadun and Mangkung, each with distinctive religious characteristics and practices. Although there are differences in teachings and rituals among these three groups, they still maintain good relations with each other, showing tolerance and mutual respect in the midst of differences.

The intersection of Islam and Masade beliefs, known as Old Islam, is an interesting phenomenon that occurred in the Sangihe archipelago more than three centuries ago. The process began with the arrival of a cleric named Mawu Masade who brought Islam to the region, which already had local religious traditions. Masade's adherents then divided themselves into three groups, namely Hadun, Hamadun and Mangkung, each with distinct characteristics and religious practices. Although there are differences in teachings and rituals among these three groups, they still maintain friendship and good relations with each other, as well as showing tolerance and mutual respect in the midst of differences.

The encounter between local beliefs and Islam in this case reflects the complex social dynamics in Sangihe society, where local beliefs and Islamic beliefs interact and adapt with each other to create a wide range of religious identities.

⁷ Malise Ruthven, Azim Nanji, *Historical Atlas of Islam*, (USA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 106-107

⁸Paul Nabarth, Gretha Liwoso, & John Semen. *Sastra Lisan Sangir Talaud*, p.13

Interestingly, although the Masade adopted some cultural elements from Islam such as the use of Islamic symbols, such as the Hijab and Songkok, they also retained a number of different rituals and procedures. This has created a unique synergy between the two religious traditions. These encounters then lead to cultural assimilation. Thus, the encounter between Islam and local beliefs not only creates differences in religious symbols, but also enriches the culture and traditions of the local community, therefore making Sangihe an example of how two belief systems can interact and contribute to a harmonious social life.

Socio-Culture of Local Belief Communities in Sangihe

The cultural character of the people of the Sangihe Islands is quite pluralistic and can be categorized based on its geographical and cultural bases (language dialects). Sangihe Islanders understand their lives based on the realization that each island they live on is integrated with other islands, especially the big island as the center surrounded by several small islands. Therefore, their social character is then distinguished in three ways, namely the awareness of the community as Tagulandang people, Siau people and Sangihe Besar people. The population in the Sangihe Islands Regency is predominantly the Sangihe ethnic community, which has one of its main identifying characteristics from the language used, namely the Sangihe language.⁹

The typical behavior of the Sangihe Islands community is the self-image of the sea people. This is indicated by the community's high mobility, open attitude, and respect for the rules of life according to the ancestors which until now feel very strong, especially regarding how "going to sea" should be. Due to this attitude to life, the people of the Sangihe Islands were able to acquire various skills in maritime and other aspects of life, such as carpentry skills in making fishing gear and building fishing organizations with traditional tools called seke.¹⁰

On the other hand, the existence of the kingdoms in Sangihe has also created a social stratification that stands out in several layers or levels, namely the first layer, the nobility in the Palace environment; the second layer, the nobility whose status is as assistants to the King; the third layer, the lower-level leaders, such as village heads or Kapitalaung and ordinary citizens; and the fourth layer, the servants who are workers. In addition, the harmony of family life in the Sangihe Islands is very close. One of the factors that support this family harmony is the attitude of mutual cooperation between one another.¹¹

The livelihoods of the Masade (Old Islam) believers are derived from agricultural products, peda crafts and trade. The main agricultural products of the Masade (Islam Tua) community are coconut, cloves and nutmeg which are usually marketed in the Tahuna city market. However, there are also agricultural products marketed in Manado city such as nutmeg and cloves. These agricultural products are taken from their individual gardens, and most of these gardens have different commodity trees, for example, one garden has coconut, nutmeg, clove and even durian trees. Therefore, the yield from the harvest in their garden is not too much with

⁹ Steven Sumolang., Kain Tenun Tradisional "KOFO" di Sangihe, p.16

¹⁰ Paul Nabarth, Gretha Liwoso, & John Semen. Sastra Lisan Sangir Talaud, p.13

¹¹ Bambang Suwondo. Adat Istiadat Daerah Sulawesi Utara. Jakarta: Proyek Penelitian dan Pencatatan Kebudayaan Daerah, 1978, p. 120

the system applied by the community. This will certainly be different if one garden is planted with only one commodity tree. In addition to the existing staple commodities, the Masade community also grows fruit commodities such as durian, tomatoes and mustard greens which they can grow in mountainous areas.¹²

Because these agricultural products are waiting for the season to harvest, most men in the Masade (Old Islam) community earn their daily income by becoming Peda or machete craftsmen. The people who make Peda or machete can produce 20-30 Peda in a day, depending on the materials and orders they get from collectors. Usually these peda makers or craftsmen are in groups to facilitate the distribution of tasks for making peda. They also use simple tools such as ignition stoves made of soil, ignition comes from coconut shells and so on. According to the Masade community, this craft has existed since long ago and was taught from generations by their grandfather. Normally, these Peda or machetes are then sent to several areas outside Sangihe including the Talaud and Ternate regions.¹³

The life of the Masade (Old Islam) community can be considered as a simplistic lifestyle. Their simplicity is part of the Masade principle of humbleness and self-cultivation. The supporting natural environment also makes the Masade community more dependent on nature, therefore they are very protective of their natural environment. They believe that all creatures must be maintained because they all contain prophets (in their terminology, these prophets are life). These principles must be implemented by all Masade believers (Old Islam).

In the Masade belief, the figure of the Imam is an important example for other Masade adherents, because the Masade (Old Islam) belief considers an Imam as a living scripture. They believe that all the imam's actions are in line with Masade beliefs as they do not have a religious holy book. As a result, any religious problems they have would be answered directly by the old priests. Nevertheless, the old priests also have responsibilities such as leading prayers and other religious ceremonies. Moreover, the circumcision of a Masade boy can only be performed by this old priest. If the circumcision is not performed by the imam, then the circumcision will not be considered acceptable by their beliefs. The priest or Imam in the Masade belief is enormously influential, even in the election of the priest, there must be a deliberation of the Masade high priests (Old Islam) to elect a new priest. Furthermore, the election of a new priest is usually due to the fact that the previous priest has died. Because, the position of priest in this belief will be carried until that person dies.¹⁴

Assimilation of Islamic Culture to Local Beliefs in Sangihe

Assimilation in a culture or society can be interpreted as a process of changing cultural or social patterns to adjust with the majority. According to Danadjaya (in Romli), a process of cultural blending occurs due to the process of assimilation, whether it occurs directly or indirectly.¹⁵ The study of the meeting of two or more

¹² Hebisima, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023.

¹³ Hebisima, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023.

¹⁴ Masihor, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023

¹⁵ Khomsahrial romli, *acculturation and assimilation in the context of inter-ethnic interaction*.

In the journal *Ijtimaiyya*, Vol. 8, No. 1, February 2015, p 3.

cultures does not only apply among tribes or ethnicities but also occurs in a particular community or religious group.

The process of assimilation can be interpreted as a meeting of two or more cultures that affect one culture with another culture as in the Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1957), cited by Ernest W. Burgess, who explains assimilation as “the process of making social adjustment to conflict situations by maintaining social distances between groups and persons, is the process by which cultures and personalities interpenetrate and fuse”.¹⁶ From Burgess' explanation, assimilation refers to the process of meeting people with people or individuals in the social and cultural system. In addition, assimilation can be seen as a process of interpretation and fusion. Through this process people and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other people or groups, with various experiences and histories, joining them in a common cultural life.

Robert E. Park also explains that assimilation is the process or processes by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritage, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence.¹⁷ Robert E. Park also explains that assimilation is the process or processes by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritage, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence.

In this way, assimilation will produce a new culture or social system for the community or ethnic group. According to Jiobu, the assimilation process can lead to two possible consequences of assimilation, namely as follows.

(1) The minority loses its distinctiveness and becomes like the majority. In the process, the majority group does not change. This is called Anglo conformity.

*(2) the ethnic and majority groups blend homogeneously. Each loses its distinctiveness and a unique product results, a process called the melting pot.*¹⁸

From Jiobu's explanation, the assimilation process can affect minority groups in a society. Minorities may lose their uniqueness and follow the culture of the majority group. In addition, the majority group will not change either socially or culturally. Furthermore, the minority and majority groups would mix homogeneously and each group would lose its uniqueness. After that, a unique product or community will emerge because of the melting pot process.

The process of assimilation is the fusion of two or more cultures, then becomes one new culture without any elements of coercion. The process of assimilation can occur if two or more groups of people with different cultures interact with each other on the basis of an open and tolerant attitude, from each group. Generally, assimilation occurs slowly and evolutively over a relatively long period of

¹⁶ Poerwanto, H. "Assimilation, Acculturation, and National Integration". *Humaniora* No. 12 September-December 1999 (29-37).

¹⁷ Poerwanto, H. *Assimilation, Acculturation, and National Integration*, p 31.

¹⁸ Robert M. Jiobu, *Ethnicity and Assimilation*, (New York: State Univ of New York Pr, 1988), p. 6

time, until without notice they have a new culture resulting from a mixture of those interacting.¹⁹

The occurrence of the assimilation process is due to the nature of humans or societies that are formed on subsystems in their respective functions and are interdependent. So that changes that occur in the function of one subsystem will automatically be reflected in changes that occur in other subsystems. Each of these settled subsystems functions to support the other subsystems in a social system. Examples of such subsystems are family, economy, politics, religion, education, recreation, law and other institutions.

Society can also be perceived as a system that can be constructed into several things including adaptation, goal achievement, integration and patterns of maintaining or enforcing the above subsystems. In this case, the adaptation function is played by the economic subsystem, the goal achievement function is performed by the political subsystem, the integration function is performed by the legal subsystem, and the function of maintaining the structure of society is performed by the cultural subsystem.

On the other hand, symbols are typical of religion, because most symbols are derived from a belief, from various rituals and religious ethics. Symbols are interpreted as a sign that is cultivated in various forms according to the culture and beliefs of each religion. Apart from the religious rituals of the Masade believers that have been explained in the previous sub-chapter, the Masade believers (Old Islam) also use religious symbols that are almost the same as those of the Islamic community. Some of the symbols included head coverings and places of worship. These religious symbols are part of the Masade (Old Islam) community. In addition, the symbols of the Masade (Old Islam) community are also part of the identity of the Masade (Old Islam) religious community in several regions in North Sulawesi such as in the Sangihe, Talaud, Sitaro, Bitung, and Manado regions, as explained from the interview data.

The first use of religious symbols of the Masade (Old Islam) community is head coverings, namely hijab and songkok.²⁰ This religious symbol in the form of clothing is usually used when there are activities or religious events of Masade (Old Islam) adherents. In the Masade (Old Islam) belief, this head covering must be used because it is related to the Masade (Old Islam) belief that there is purity that must be maintained by every human being, so that part must be covered by using a songkok or hijab.²¹ In this case, the use of this religious symbol is not only used by adults but also by children and teenagers. Socially, the use of hijab and songkok makes Masade (Old Islam) adherents seems to be similar to Muslims, this is due to the symbols in the form of clothing used are not much different from Muslims in Indonesia.²² However, Masade (Old Islam) adherents believe that the use and symbols have been passed down from generation to generation by their predecessors.

¹⁹ Widiana, Nurhuda. (2015). *The Struggle of Islam with Local Culture: Case Study of Samin Community in Japanese Hamlet Bojonegoro*. Theologia, 26(2) p 206.

²⁰ Masihor, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023

²¹ Masihor, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023

²² Masihor, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023

The second use of symbols is places of worship. In the belief of Masade (Old Islam) adherents, the term for the mention of houses of worship is also mosque.²³ However, the Masade mosque is architecturally different from the Muslim community, but they use the same term, namely mosque. The mosque of Masade (Old Islam) adherents in Lenganeng Village is architecturally rectangular with a large main room, and there is no separation between men and women in the mosque. In addition, no places such as pulpits and calligraphic decorations are found like Muslim mosques in general.

Summary

This research shows that the convergence of Islam and Masade beliefs in the Sangihe islands has created a dynamic and complex interaction between the two religious traditions. Despite differences in practices and beliefs, Masade believers who are divided into three groups are still able to maintain harmonious relations and mutual respect, reflecting the values of tolerance and harmony in society. This process of cultural assimilation not only enriches their religious identity, but also shows how elements from both cultures can be mutually complementary and contribute to a more inclusive social life.

In addition, this study highlights the importance of understanding the local context in the process of cultural assimilation, where interactions between majority and minority groups can result a unique and diverse identity. Therefore, the results of this study can contribute to the study of ethno-islamic law and Islamic cultural research methodology, and emphasize the need for a culturally sensitive approach in social research. This research is expected to serve as a reference for further studies on intercultural interaction and its impact on communities in other regions.

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²³ Masihor, *Interview*, Sangihe Island, 2023

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