

# The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Ritual of Marapu in West Sumba: Funeral Ceremony

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## ABSTRACT

Marapu is an original belief of Sumbanese in East Nusa Tenggara, who believes in a connection between ancestors and reality. Marapu Funeral ceremonies involve Kedde, that is when family come to the funeral and bring buffalo or pig, as a form to honour the deceased. Those animals will be slaughtered as sacrifice to the ancestors. However, the COVID-19 pandemic is hampering activities that attract crowds. "PSBB" as known as Large-Scale Social Restriction is a policy by the government that requires the community to conduct social distancing. As an event attended by many people, the continuation of the ritual is threatened. Thus, this study aims to look at the impact of the pandemic on Kedde, as one of the cultural heritage of Sumba. The research method used in this article is semi-ethnographic qualitative by Creswell using The Circuit of Culture by Stuart Hall and is supported by interviews with local people and health workers in Sumba. Furthermore, this research will show how the Marapu tradition deals with government regulations in terms of health protocols. This research will be an input to the response of local people when facing a pandemic as well as explaining the compromise by the Sumbanese.

**Keywords:** pandemic, COVID-19, Marapu, funeral service, West Sumba

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Soeriadiredja [1], Sumba is known as Tana Marapu or Bumi Marapu. Marapu is the religion of the population of Sumba, which is followed by approximately half of the population. According to L. Onvee [2], Marapu comes from the word *ma* which means "that" and *rapu* which means "to be respected, worshiped, and deified". Meanwhile, according to A.A. Yewangoe [3], Marapu comes from the word *ma* which means "that", and *rappu* which means hidden. Marapu also comes from the word *mara* which means "similar" and *appu* which means "ancestors". From these two different definitions, it can be understood that Marapu is a religion that is related to the spirits of the ancestors. Because of the supernatural powers possessed by ancestral spirits, they become intermediaries between humans and God. Marapu adherents can be found in the Traditional Village on Sumba Island.

According to Soelarto [4], Marapu has a series of rituals carried out by its adherents, including death ceremonies, rituals related to farming, construction of traditional houses, and others. For them, offering to God is a must in every opportunity. Therefore, the rituals or ceremonies that are carried out usually have a long series of events and can be attended by anyone. These traditional rituals are followed and carried out by young people to adults, even the elderly. Apart from that, the rituals performed by Marapu are also a strategy to strengthen brotherhood within humans. Therefore, every ritual may be attended by anyone, even tourists, and in as

many numbers as possible. Just like other religions in general, the Marapu adherents believe that life after death continues in heaven, or what is known as Parai Marapu. In carrying out various Marapu rituals, even in death ceremonies, these rituals must involve animal slaughtering because the people believe that the spirits of their ancestors are present at every traditional ceremony. Thus, they make offerings in the form of these animals. Then, the slaughtered animals are consumed by those who are present at the event. The Marapu people also believe that requests to God are conveyed through their ancestors, therefore they have great respect for the spirits of their ancestors.

In early 2020, a virus spread throughout the world including Indonesia and has now been declared as a pandemic. COVID-19 is a new disease that began with an outbreak in Wuhan, China in December 2019. This virus disrupts human respiratory system and is very fatal. The World Health Organization stated that COVID-19 is more dangerous if it is infecting the elders and people with certain medical conditions. The transmission is relatively fast because it can spread through droplets from the nose or mouth that come out when an infected person is coughing, sneezing, or talking. A person can also be infected by touching a surface with a droplet, then proceed to touch their eyes, nose, or mouth.

With the existence of the pandemic, countries around the world have made various health regulations to deal with this problem, and Indonesia is no exception. Several regulations were made to regulate physical activity

restrictions or physical distancing which is stated in Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No.21 of 2020 and Regulation of the Minister of Health of the Republic of Indonesia No.9 of 2020 which discusses Large-Scale Social Restrictions as known as PSBB (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar). In addition, the local government, especially West Sumba, also issued regulations to prevent and deal with the spread of COVID-19 in West Sumba, namely West Sumba Regent Regulation No. Pem/100/41/53.12/05/2020 concerning the Prevention and Management of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in West Sumba. These regulations then affect various community activities, including customary and religious activities. The Marapu community in West Sumba is one of the communities affected because their traditional and religious activities require to gather in large numbers, which is very contrary to the regulations.

Regarding previous research on this topic, there has not been any research linking the pandemic to the Marapu funeral ceremony, due to the pandemic that just happened in early 2020. The Marapu funeral ceremony in Sumba is usually attended by many people, thus this research shows whether this activity is still able to take place by sticking to the previous system or adjusting to government health protocols. Theoretically, this research will be input for local community responses when facing a pandemic, in particular whether there has been a conflict due to the attachment of local communities to traditional rituals that have existed since ancient times by traditional leaders without the involvement of the government. Meanwhile, the pandemic has become a global problem, yet health protocol is made without involving customary considerations. Thus, the reaction of local peoples will be seen when they faced the government regulations. That way, it is hoped that this research can become a reference when the government decided to make a national regulations that deal with customs. In practical terms, this research will describe the compromises and resistance made by Sumba people to demonstrate the resilience of their culture, especially the Marapu funeral tradition.

Based on the explanation from the research background, the issue raised is how the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the sustainability of customs, especially the funeral of Marapu ritual in West Sumba. The purpose of this study is to see the possibility of changes in the implementation of the Marapu funeral ceremony in West Sumba with the COVID-19 pandemic.

**2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a literature study with a qualitative semi-ethnographic method. According to John W. Creswell [5], qualitative research is methods for exploring and understanding the meaning that several individuals or groups of people perceive as originating from social or humanitarian problems. The theory used is The Circuit of Culture by Stuart Hall. This theory

classifies five main processes which include production or something that results from the culture, consumption or use of the culture that was created, the regulations or regulations established for the created culture, a representation or representation of that culture, as well as the identity or actor and characteristics. of a culture. The theory was adapted from du Gay et al [6].

This research was supported by virtual interviews with the local people of Sumba and medical officers. The data source used is news from Media Indonesia, CNN Indonesia, and Tribun News.

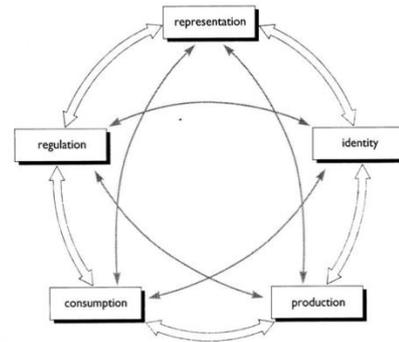


Figure 1 The Circuit of Culture [7]

**3. FUNERAL CEREMONY IN MARAPU AND THE MODERN WORLD**

Marapu customary burial is a continuation of the tradition of the ancestors by carrying out a burial system in the form of a Kedde ritual. According to Soelarto [4], the burial in Marapu tradition is carried out in several stages. The first stage is temporary burial or primary burial. After that, a second burial was carried out. The gradual burial was carried out because according to Marapu belief, during the primary burial, a person's spirit is still on earth. After the final ceremony and secondary burial, the spirit is raised to the *parai marapu*. In carrying out its rituals, there are differences between the West and East Sumba. In West Sumba at this time, primary burials were carried out in a short period of time, namely only for one to several weeks. During the primary burial, the body has been placed in the grave without being closed. After the last ceremony, the body is buried. This indicates that the secondary ceremony of the burial ritual has been carried out. However, this is no longer practiced today because bodies were placed in coffins which were then placed in the house. The mourners will pay their respects in the form of giving a sarong if the deceased is a woman, and cloth if the deceased is a man. Finally, the cloth or sarong is placed on the table next to the deceased's chest.

According to Susan, who is Sumba native, the ritual system for traditional ceremonies continues like before without any change or clash with the modern era (personal communication, 28 August 2020). Susan is a 23-year-old Marapu adherent. She once migrated outside Sumba to continue her studies. Even so, she still carries out traditional ceremonies in Sumba in accordance with

customary law as a form of respect for ancestors. This shows/proves that while the Marapu people have been exposed to modern culture, they do not abandon their culture which has been held firmly. A culture is a form of respect for their ancestors.

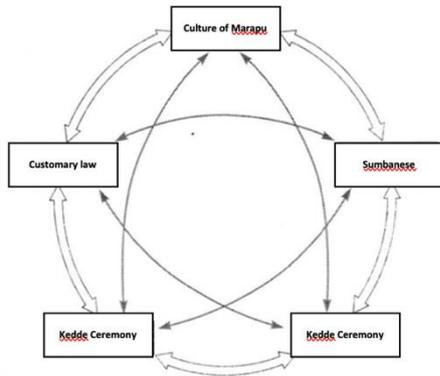


Figure 2 The scheme of Kedde

If it is linked to Hall's theory, the regulation that is established gets the influence of its cultural identity. Identity is the main role that creates, makes rules, and lives by it. Since Kedde is a culture of Marapu, her identity is a Sumbanese Marapu. She has also been exposed to modern culture outside of Sumba culture due to her overseas studies. However, it did not make her forget the Kedde ritual. Thus, it shows that there was no shift in the rules, because Susan kept her identity as a Sumbanese.

#### 4. COVID-19 AS A CLASH BETWEEN TRADITIONAL CEREMONIES AND HEALTH PROTOCOLS

The spread of COVID-19 occurs through physical contact between humans, it means that the transmission occurs quickly. As a traditional ceremony attended by many people, the Kedde ceremony is one of the rituals that collide with the COVID-19 outbreak. This happened because the event was attended by a large crowd and was contrary to the health protocol set by the government. Apart from that, the ceremony also contradicts the PSBB (Large-Scale Social Restrictions). As a result of the health protocol established by the government, family members who wish to hold traditional ceremonies in the midst of a pandemic are forced to adjust and rearrange the series of events such as the duration of the event, the number of guests, and the slaughtered animals.

Based on antaranews.com [8], the PSBB policy is regulated in Law Number 6 of 2018 Article 4 concerning Health Quarantine which is stipulated by President Jokowi. The law states that the PSBB of a region is a policy of the central government based on the needs and interests of the respective citizens. The government also requires people to avoid crowds, maintain distance from each other, wear masks, and wash their hands. The protocol prevents the community from carrying out traditional Kedde rituals properly in Sumba and other

daily rituals. In addition, there's also different mindsets between people living in rural areas and those living in cities.

As a result of the new regulations established by the government, namely in the form of health protocols, it is necessary to adjust to customary law. This is intended so that indigenous people can continue to carry out traditional rituals as they should. Then, the different ways of thinking between rural and urban communities also insisted the adjustment of government regulations with customary regulations.

#### 5. TRANSFORMATION IN MARAPU'S FUNERAL RITES DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Amid the pandemic, Marapu's funeral ceremony was carried out as usual. According to Ms. Yenny through an interview, who is a native of Sumba, stated that the Kedde ritual was running amid a pandemic (personal communication, August 2020). It is known from the reason for their death, the Sumbanese died because of their age. According to her statement, there were no Sumbanese who had died due to COVID-19 in her village. If the cause of death is not COVID-19, it is not an alibi for the Sumbanese not to hold the funeral ceremony.

Although the ceremony is permitted to be held, the system must be changed according to the current situation. Before the pandemic, the ceremony could be held for a week following a series of events. However, by adjusting to the situation, the duration is shortened to 2-3 days. Apart from the duration, the number of guests who come is also limited. Before the pandemic, grieving families usually received guests who wanted to visit. However, due to the outbreak, the community began to limit the visiting hours for guests, and some even did not receive guests at all. Then, the number of animals slaughtered as a form of final respect is also limited. Usually, the people of Sumba could cut 5 buffalos during Kedde ritual but due to the pandemic, the bereaved family was forced to slaughter only 1 buffalo and 1 pig. The number of animals that are slaughtered is the pride of the family, the more slaughtered, the better.

Through an interview, Ms. Yenny revealed that the change in the series of events was quite devastating because usually, this event became a gathering spot for people in Sumba. Due to the outbreak, meetings were limited. Regarding the slaughtered animal matter, the people of Sumba do not make a big deal about it because although only a few animals are slaughtered, it is still a matter of pride for the families left behind. Despite the changing of the event, this did not diminish the respect of the people of Sumba towards those who died. The community continues to carry out a series of events as a

form of final respect by adjusting to existing protocols such as washing hands, maintaining distance, or wearing masks.

According to the official website of West Sumba district, *sumbabaratkab.go.id* [9], West Sumba had entered the red zone. This has been counted since June 28, 2020. The case is spread at the Waikabubak Regional General Hospital. Residents who tested positive came from Loli District, 3 from Tebara Village and 1 from Uburaya Village. Based on the results of an interview with Susan, who lives in the city, he revealed that people in cities are more aware of the COVID outbreak, while those who live in villages often underestimate COVID-19 and think it doesn't exist. The people's mindset is very influential on how they deal with the situation and live during a pandemic. This then shapes the person to be alert or not believe in the existence of COVID-19 just because it did not happen among their closest circles. In addition, it creates people who do not adhere to health protocols and think that the epidemic will never enter the area they live in.

One concrete example of the impact of health protocols on traditional rituals in Sumba is the tradition of kissing the nose between communities as a typical form of greeting for the people of Sumba. According to Susan, through interview, there was a controversy about this tradition among the people of Sumba, which is the public's willingness to do the kissing nose tradition or not. Based on the interview, many Sumbanese refuse to practice the ritual because of fear of the pandemic. On the other hand, many Sumbanese also insist to do this ritual because they don't believe in the existence of COVID-19. Thus, debate ensues.

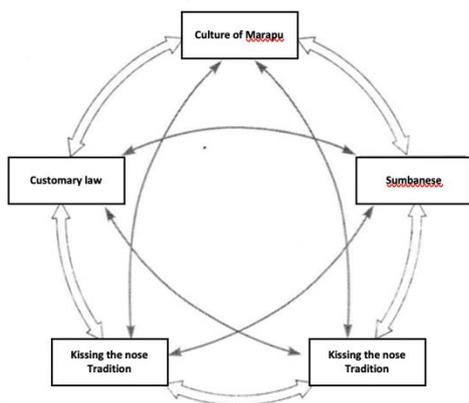


Figure 3 The scheme before pandemic

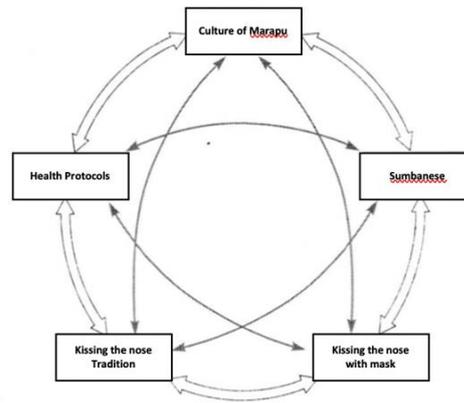


Figure 4 The scheme after pandemic

If it is related to the theory of The Circuit of Culture, the ritual of kissing the nose is part of the rituals of the people of Sumba because this is what distinguishes the people of Sumba when they greet people. However, due to the health protocol, the ritual of kissing the nose is facing obstacles because people are not allowed to have direct physical contact with one another and an obligation to wear masks. As a result, there is a shift in the ritual implementation system. The change in regulations set by the government has also caused a shift in the actor of this ritual, namely those people who stop doing the ritual of kissing the nose in avoiding the spread of the pandemic. However, based on the interviews with the people of Sumba regarding this situation, they stated that there are still indigenous people who perform this ritual, by kissing the nose with a mask. That way, they do not make direct physical contact but with protection.

To avoid a shift that is too significant, a compromise is needed between the government and the community. This can be done by obeying the established health protocols while performing traditional rituals. This can be found with the usage of masks during the ritual. In addition, there is a reduction in the duration of traditional rituals to avoid contact with other people. With a good compromise between the government and the local people, they finally succeeded in maintaining the identity of the people of Sumba. However, the compromise also leads to being underestimate, this can be seen from the fact that there are still people who are indisciplin in wearing masks nor keeping their distance from other people

## 6. ATTEMPTS TO PRESERVE THE MARAPU FUNERAL RITES CEREMONIES AMID THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

For the public not to be infected by the outbreak, several efforts and methods are needed. If the vaccine hasn't been found, the public is forced to obey the health

protocols. This is also applied by people who want to carry out traditional rituals amid a pandemic.

According to Ms. Neffy, a nurse at the Sumba Foundation Clinic through an interview, the local government has provided free cloth masks to the community in the hope that people will always use masks (personal communication, August 2020). This act of distribution is reciprocal to health protocols. The act of mask distribution was done by one of the people's representatives (DPR) member of West Sumba, which is stated by an article made by *poskupang.com*. The representative member also distributed *jamu* or an Indonesian herbal drink which is believed to strengthen the immune system. Then, the article also explained that the number of masks in pharmacies at that time was decreasing, making it difficult for people to get masks. Therefore, assistance from the government can help those who have difficulty in finding masks. According to the news article, the people's representative member also distributed leaflets to raise public awareness regarding the pandemic [10].

Apart from distributing masks for free, the government also provided a place to wash hands in Sumba so that people can always maintain their cleanliness. The event was written in a news article *poskupang.com* which covered the Head of the Community and Village Empowerment Office of West Sumba Regency installing water reservoirs for washing hands at the market [11]. The reservoir has a capacity of 650 ml which makes visitors and sellers be able to wash their hands in the market area. The installation of the reservoir is an effort by the government to help reduce exposure to the pandemic in the community.

However, according to Ms. Neffy, the community has no longer been able to access the handwashing facilities in the village because they were taken back by the government 2 months ago. For the Sumba residents in the village, washing hands is considered as prestigious because clean water is a resource that is difficult to access, considering their geographical conditions. Filling water in drainage or reservoir requires excessive effort. Therefore, public awareness is needed in order not to continue relying on the government and thus people can continue their activities by complying with existing health protocols and avoiding disease outbreaks. Lack of awareness leads the public to underestimate the outbreak. According to Ms. Neffy, in Sumba there has not been comprehensive counseling only from health clinics regarding the pandemic and only certain people can access it.

## 7. THE REALITY OF SUMBA

According to Media Indonesia [12], West Sumba is the first district to implement the new normal. The article

revealed that at that time, there were no corona positive patients in West Sumba. Then, in the area, there were also no patients under surveillance regarding COVID-19, except for seven people without symptoms and three people under surveillance. According to the article, the Governor of West Nusa Tenggara has provided access for areas with zero COVID-19 cases to implement the new normal without having to wait for the full implementation of the new normal dated June 15, 2020. However, the implementation of the new normal must still follow the advice of the COVID-19 SATGAS (Task Force), that is to always keep a distance, stay out of the crowd, and to wear masks. Based on orders from SATGAS COVID-19, the key to terminating the virus is in the hands of the people. By obeying the existing protocols, the chain of virus spread can be terminate quickly. That way, the community can continue their activities normally and can carry out traditional rituals in accordance with their respective series.

In the middle of the PSBB period, according to Ms. Yenny through an interview, there was a suspected COVID-19 patient who died and did not get the final respect as a Sumbanese through the Kedde ceremony. However, after the results of the test came out, it was noted that there was no COVID-19 virus in the body. In the end, the family dismantled the grave to give the body a final tribute by doing Kedde. From this incident, it can be proven that the people of Sumba is very obedient towards the rules that has been made, namely that they still follow the COVID-19 burial standards. This incident also proves that the Sumbanese people is very loyal to their ancestors and customs because they still insist on paying final respect to the body by practicing Kedde.

As of September 2020, East Nusa Tenggara had zero case. However, seeing the number of cases that continue to increase, on September 12, 2020 through the media *kompastv.com* [13], every province in Indonesia had new cases, including East Nusa Tenggara. However, the number of positive cases in East Nusa Tenggara is solely 4, thus the province is now included in the new case category under 10.

## 8. CONCLUSION

If the COVID-19 case is linked to rituals in Sumba, the outbreak only affected the Marapu ritual during the PSBB period without any significant changes. It can be proven from the ritual that continues with only slight modifications to the series of events such as the capacity of visitors, the duration of the event, and the number of animals being slaughtered. This is proof that the people of Sumba are loyal to their ancestors and uphold traditional values that have been formed long ago. Tradition holds important meaning for the people of Sumba.

Even though the people of Sumba are still carrying out the Kedde ceremony, they still follow the burial standards according to the health protocol. Therefore, even though they are loyal to their ancestors, they still

consider health protocols related to burial processions so that both customary law and government law are balanced. The problem that arises is that many people still do not fully believe in the existence of COVID-19. Therefore, an important step is needed for the government to urge the public not to consider the current epidemic to become ignorant individuals.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Revinda Syahniza Renata and Diah Kartini Lasman. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Revinda Syahniza Renata and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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