



Rera-wulan Tana-ekan: Adaptation and Resistance of Ancestral Religion in Adonara

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Abstract. This paper will Analyze the variety of responses of the Adonarese to the arrival of foreign religions (Catholic and Islamic). Those religions encountered the Adonarese. They adapt when the government implements regulations on religion. However, they tend to resist because the government's rules contradict their belief. This study employs an ethnohistory method with a qualitative approach. This study shows that the Adonarese have adapted and resisted foreign religions. In some cases, foreign religions have influenced the practice of adat belief ceremonies. The Adonarese combine elements of Catholicism and Islam into adat belief practices. Thus, hybrid forms of worship emerge. However, tensions and conflicts often occur when there is an attempt to remove or replace adat beliefs with foreign religious teachings by force. This conflict encompasses not only religious aspects but also the Adonarese cultural and social identity.

Keywords: Adonarese; Rera-wulan Tana-ekan; Resistance; Adaptation; Religion.

1 Introduction

Adonara is one of the islands in East Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, that has experienced significant influence from Catholic missionaries and Islamic kingdoms. Nevertheless, Adonara possesses a unique wealth of local cultural and religious heritage. The ancestral religion, often referred to as traditional beliefs (Rera-wulan Tana-ekan), has been an integral part of Adonara's community life for centuries. The existence of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as the customary guide for the people of Adonara is an interesting topic for further study. Interestingly, when Islam and Catholicism arrived in Adonara, Rera-wulan Tana-ekan continued to serve as the customary guide for the community, despite initial resistance.

Islamization in Adonara occurred long before the arrival of Catholicism, making Islam the first foreign religion to enter Adonara. The arrival of Islam in East Flores is believed to have originated from Seram and Ternate [1]. The process of Islamization in

Adonara reflects a broader trend in Indonesia, where Islam interacts with local customs and beliefs, resulting in unique syncretic practices [2]. This phenomenon is not limited to Adonara alone but is part of a larger pattern observed in various regions of Indonesia where Islam has been integrated with local traditions [3].

The introduction of Islam to regions like Adonara often involves a process of acculturation, where Islamic practices have been adapted to accommodate local customs and rituals. The blending of Islamic teachings with indigenous traditions is a common feature in many Indonesian communities, reflecting the dynamic interaction between Islam and local cultures [4]. The coexistence of Islamic beliefs alongside traditional practices is evident in various aspects of daily life, including rituals, social norms, and community structures [5].

The missionary efforts in Adonara occurred concurrently with Western colonialism moving eastward. The initial goal of European colonialism in the east was to seek sources of spices as trade commodities. However, during this period, Western powers were under the dominance of the Catholic Church, so their journeys eastward were accompanied by missionary efforts aimed at Christianization [6]. Missionary activities focused on Christianizing the eastern part of the archipelago because this region was still relatively ungoverned by Islamic leaders. Interestingly, Christianization was also used as a strategy to facilitate Western, particularly Portuguese, colonialism in Adonara. This was because the methods employed in Christianization included providing educational services and improving the lives of the eastern communities.

The arrival of these new religions brought complex impacts on the Adonara community [7]. On one hand, some elements of the ancestral religion may adapt to synergize with the teachings of the new religions. On the other hand, there is also resistance to the influence of these new religions, which can be reflected in efforts to preserve traditional beliefs and practices.

Many studies have examined Christianization and the culture in Adonara. Previous research on Adonara's culture shows a diversity of rituals, ceremonies, and community lifestyles [8–15]. Additionally, previous studies also explore cultural and religious crossovers [16–19].

Therefore, this study aims to understand the dynamics of adaptation and resistance to ancestral religion in Adonara, focusing on the concept of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as a guide for the local community. Rera-wulan Tana-ekan is a concept involving the relationship between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits in the daily life of the Adonara community. Through this research, it is hoped that insights can be gained into how the ancestral religion continues to endure and transform in a modern context, and how this affects the identity and religious practices of the Adonara community as a whole.

This study employs an ethnohistory method with a qualitative approach. Ethnohistory is a field of knowledge studied using anthropological and historical approaches [20]. So, this study describes and portrays the socio-cultural conditions of the Adonara community from the past to the present. Thus, the research is conducted empirically and theoretically to obtain an in-depth analysis of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as the adat belief of the Adonara community and its response to foreign religions (Catholicism and Islam). The study begins with reviewing available and accessible literature. After compiling the available literature, field observations are conducted by examining traditional houses (Terung, Lamahala, Pepa Geka, Adonara) and kingdoms in Adonara (Terung, Lamahala, Adonara). Data completeness is also obtained through interviews

with royal descendants and traditional leaders in Adonara, such as Muhammad Burhan Kapitan Koten (the last descendant of the Terung king) and Pius Wisok (traditional leader of Pepa Geka). Referring to Vansina the use of oral tradition as a passed-down tradition can serve as a source of oral history [21]. Continuous observation of research objects is also carried out, enriching the data with documentation of traditional houses and available field archives. The next step, following Miles & Huberman involves analyzing the data by reducing, presenting, and drawing conclusions [22].

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as Adat belief in Adonara

The culture of Adonara is shaped by the civilization around Mount Ile Boleng (Ile Jadi). The population in Adonara consists of various ethnic groups, including the Ile Jadi (indigenous people), Seran Goran, and Sina Jawa, among others. These diverse ethnic groups in Adonara have intermarried, creating a strong local culture [23]. The traditional face of daily life in Adonara is reflected in their belief system, known as adat belief, and their rituals centered around three key cultural aspects: marriage, death, and agriculture [24]. Of these three aspects, marriage is considered the most central cultural element. This is due to the concept of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan, which literally means Sun-Moon (rulers of the sky) and Land-Earth (rulers of the land). The Adonara people believe that the union of rera-wulan and tana-ekan creates the universe, which is the source of human life [14].

The ethnic diversity in Lamaholot indirectly represents a cultural crossover with various unique characteristics in each of its regions. Despite the background of different ethnic groups, the people of Lamaholot uphold Gemohing as a pillar, guided by the principles of *ina tou ama ehang* and *puin taan tou gahan taan ehan* [9]. These principles signify that all Lamaholot people originate from a common mother and father, and thus, the spirit of unity must be upheld. Because of these principles, the adat belief (Rera-wulan Tana-ekan) is deeply ingrained in the Lamaholot community, even long before foreign religions (Catholicism and Islam) arrived. Thus, it can be said that Rera-wulan Tana-ekan is inherent to every community in Adonara and serves as a unifying force among the different ethnic groups there.

The practice of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan shares similarities with the worship concepts of other religions. Humans, as worshippers of the supreme being (Rera-wulan), must make offerings (such as *sesajian*, *pao-bae*, *huke*) to receive blessings (*kuat-kemuha*) from Rera-wulan. This religion also believes in other spirits, both malevolent and benevolent, such as *koda-kewonot*, *nitun-harin*, *menakan*, and *menebin*. Places of worship in Adonara are typically called *nuba-nara* (a stone that symbolizes the connection between humans and rera-wulan). *Nuba-nara* serves as a symbol of the ancestors for a family (clan) in Adonara and acts as a link between rera-wulan and tana-ekan [15]. In addition to *nuba-nara*, Adonara also has places of worship called *koke bale* (usually located not far from *nuba-nara*).

In some rural areas, particularly on Adonara Island, Solor Island, and several villages on the eastern part of Flores Island, *koke bale* (*uli beliwo*) is established as the village center (*lewo*). It is believed that this place is a point of contact with the highest entities, *Rera-wulan Tana-ekan* [10]. Consequently, the Lamaholot people consider *koke bale* as the core of their religious practices. Today, the role of *koke bale* has shifted to places of worship for world religions, such as chapels, churches, and mosques. However, *koke bale*'s presence is still maintained.

The ancestral ceremonies of the Lamaholot are still focused on *koke bale*, which serves as the center of social life with a dominant role. This location is strategic for making important decisions regarding lifestyle, customary systems, and the future of Lamaholot, where all significant matters are discussed and decided [9]. It serves as the community center where all members gather for deliberations and remains a source of strength for the community, both within and beyond the village, even extending to places abroad.

This section has fundamentally described the adat belief (*Rera-wulan Tana-ekan*) on Adonara Island. Regarding the concepts of belief, principles, and goals of the adat belief in Adonara, it is intriguing to explore further aspects such as the rituals of *bau lolon*, *tuno manuk*, *mula nuba*, marriage, death, agriculture, and murder, among others. The current question is whether the adat belief has experienced continuity with foreign religions, showing adaptive behaviors, or even resistance to foreign religions (Catholicism and Islam). The next section will explain the interactions and conflicts between adat beliefs and foreign religions.

3.2 Rera-wulan Tana-ekan, Islam, and Catholicism in Adonara Before the New Order

Geographically, East Flores Regency consists of three islands: Larantuka, Solor, and Adonara, which are surrounded by the Larantuka Strait (separating Lembata and Solor), the Flores Sea to the north, and the Sawu Sea to the south. Given the geographical conditions of East Flores, it is not surprising that ports (maritime routes) serve as connections between Larantuka, Solor, Adonara, and even external regions from economic, socio-cultural, and political perspectives.

Before the colonial period, ports in East Flores were already active as traditional ports that facilitated interactions between the communities of Larantuka, Solor, and Adonara. This is evidenced by the spread of Islam in East Flores in the early 14th century [1]. Then, in 1515, the Portuguese began landing in Solor and Adonara in search of commodities (such as sandalwood) after their arrival in the Moluccas [25]. Following the Portuguese arrival, the ports in Flores became a trading hub for foreign travelers. According to Fernando Mendez Pinto, Solor became a landing destination after acquiring pepper and gold from Menancabo (Minangkabao) and Borneo (Kalimantan) [26].

In pursuit of commodities (sandalwood) and the spread of religion (Catholicism), the Portuguese established a base for defense and trade in Lohayong (located on Solor Island near Adonara). Since then, the Adonara and Solor regions developed alongside the bustling trade routes in the Solor Sea [25]. Upon closer examination, it is apparent that the Portuguese efforts to establish a base in Lohayong were also a strategy to curb

the spread of Islam in East Flores, given that in the 16th and 17th centuries, Islam was rapidly expanding in Java and undertaking expeditions in the archipelago. The Islamization of the archipelago was seen as a threat to the Portuguese colonial mission in Adonara.

Referring to Lapiian's view on ancient ports as connectors between land and sea, ancient ports served as centers of interaction between local and international communities [27]. Adonara, as one such ancient port, had opportunities for political, ideological, cultural, and even religious contestation between travelers and local communities. One intriguing contestation to study is the conflict between foreign religions (Catholicism and Islam) and the adat belief (Rera-wulan Tana-ekan).

The contestation between foreign religions, such as Catholicism and Islam, and the adat belief Rera-wulan Tana-ekan in Adonara is a complex phenomenon that reflects deep social and cultural dynamics. Rera-wulan Tana-ekan is a traditional belief system long adhered to by the Adonara community, integrating animistic practices with reverence for ancestors and nature. In this belief system, the community believes that nature and ancestors possess powers that must be honored through various rituals and ceremonies.

The arrival of Catholicism and Islam in Adonara during the colonial and post-colonial periods brought significant changes to the belief structures and daily practices of the local people. The spread of Catholicism began with missions by European missionaries, while Islam was spread by traders and missionaries from various regions of the archipelago. Both religions offered belief systems different from Rera-wulan Tana-ekan, leading to challenges and resistance from local communities who wished to preserve their traditions.

The initial onset of religious contestation in Adonara began with Portuguese colonialism and their mission to bring missionaries to Eastern Indonesia in the 16th century [6]. Adonara, as an ancient international port, could not prevent the spread of Islam through maritime routes. This is evidenced by the existence of the Islamic Adonara Kingdom in the 17th century [28]. The influence of Islamic and Catholic powers divided the Flores Timur (East Flores) region (Adonara) into two areas: the coastal (Paji) and the mountain (Demon) regions (see Figure 1).

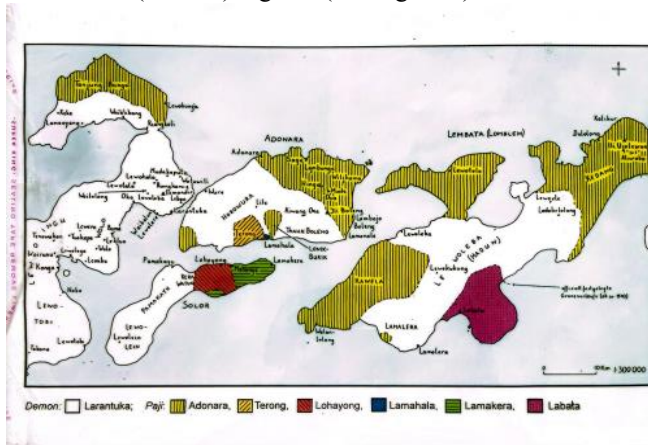


Fig. 1. The Boundaries of the Panji and Demon Territories Source: Author's Document

Catholic missionary Aernsbergen, as noted in Barnes, wrote that the opposition between the Paji (coastal people) and Demon (mountain people) was so profound that when a new missionary arrived, people would want to know whether he came from the coast or the mountains [23]. The inherited hostility between the Paji and Demon was accompanied by differences in language and religion. The Paji were settlers and Muslims, while the Demon were inland mountain people who were considered "ignorant" [23]. This rivalry persists to this day and has given rise to a cultural practice in Adonara, namely ritual killings (*perang tanding*) between the coastal and mountain communities.

The local resistance to the arrival of foreign religions (Catholicism and Islam) has shaped the interaction between religion and local customs. The similarities between Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as the "Mother" concept for nature and the Tuan Ma (the statue of the Virgin Mary) in Catholicism have led to a subtle assimilation process between traditional religious practices and Catholicism. Similarly, the practices of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan and Islam have been conducted in tandem, with adat and religion coexisting. The difference between Islam and Catholicism in adat practices lies in their sacredness.

The presence of Islam and missionaries in Adonara has played a crucial role in shaping the religious landscape and cultural dynamics of the region. Missionary activities in Adonara have contributed to the introduction and spread of Christianity among the local population, leading to complex interactions between various belief traditions and systems. The impact of missionaries in Adonara is evident in various aspects of community life, including religious practices, social structures, and educational systems [2].

In the context of Adonara, the process of Islamization may have led to a reinterpretation of local traditions from an Islamic perspective. This reinterpretation is not a one-sided assimilation of local practices into Islam but represents a dynamic exchange where elements of Islam and adat influence each other [29]. The integration of Islamic principles into local customs can be seen as a way to align traditions and religion, allowing for the coexistence of various cultural practices within the framework of Islamic teachings [30].

The impact of Islamization on the built environment and architecture in regions like Adonara is also significant. Islamic architecture has played a role in shaping residential structures and urban spaces, reflecting the influence of Islamic beliefs and traditions on the physical landscape [31]. Islamic architectural principles, guided by Sharia law, emphasize the importance of creating environments that support moral values and community well-being [32]. The integration of Islamic architectural principles with local building practices contributes to the visual representation of Islam within the community.

3.3 Rera-wulan Tana-ekan, Islam and Catholicism in Adonara During New Order

There are three significant forces that impact the daily life of the Adonara community: adat (adat belief), the church (foreign religion), and the state. Adat has long dominated the social system of Adonara; however, since the arrival of the Catholic Church in East Flores in the mid-16th century, a contestation between adat and the church

began to emerge. This contestation is particularly evident in the deepening of human values between these two institutions, where interactions between the church and local community have shaped a new identity for the Adonara people [7].

Although the church succeeded in converting a significant portion of the Adonara population to Catholicism, the community developed its own way of internalizing Catholic values. The church's efforts to spread Catholicism involved encouraging the Adonara community to participate in weekly rituals and providing services based on community needs. These services include education, health care, and infrastructure (securities, water, electricity, transportation, and more) [23]. This means that both adat and Catholic values influence Adonara's identity. However, within their social order, adat is still considered to hold the highest place. The identity of the Adonara community continues to evolve amid the influence of these two forces, reflecting their adaptation to new values while maintaining local traditions.

Before 1965, government intervention in Adonara was very limited, allowing Catholicism to take a significant role in community services. The state's role became more significant and began to overshadow the church's role after 1965, likely due to the Indonesian Presidential Decree No. 1/PNPS of 1965 concerning the Prevention of Abuse and/or Desecration of Religion. The presence of the state created tension between state and church roles, especially in the contestation over providing public services to the Adonara community. A common issue in modern states is the tendency to overlook various aspects. In contrast, pre-modern states are often blind to many aspects and have limited knowledge about feudal societies [33].

In Adonara, the state has not been particularly attentive to the community. In development studies terminology, Adonara is considered a failed state [6]. During the New Order period, development in Adonara was neglected compared to other regions in western Indonesia. Indeed, eastern Indonesia, including East Nusa Tenggara Province, was labeled as the poorest, most isolated, and underdeveloped province in Indonesia due to physical isolation and inadequate infrastructure.

The contestation between the state and the church is intertwined with the adat ingrained in the Adonara community. The Adonara community's resistance encompasses not only cultural aspects but also social and governmental ones. This is evidenced by Law No. 22 of 1999 on Regional Government, later revised by Law No. 32/2004. The regional government sought to create new autonomous regions, differing from the adat concept of territorial division based on "Lewo." Consequently, village expansions led to conflicts within the villages due to competition over symbols of "Lewo," such as nubanara or traditional houses among villages within a unit [34].

Regarding resistance, the story of Paji and Demon is an example of the conflict between local communities and outsiders in Adonara. The aftermath of the Paji and Demon story is the ritual killing. Data from 1990-1996 indicates that murders and violence in Adonara were rooted in traditional practices of killing [35]. In response to this phenomenon, the Church and the state provided facilities as a third party to mediate peace. This effort represents an approach between the state, church, and Adonara community. This aligns with Adonara's peace culture, including ceremonies such as ega tuak (mixing toddy), gelu neak (exchanging coconut shell cups), gelu wua warak (exchanging betel baskets), and bua hama hama (shared meals). Thus, it can be concluded that the Adonara community demonstrates an adaptive response to these efforts.

3.4 Rera-wulan Tana-ekan, Islam, and Catholicism in Contemporary Adonara

The impact of Islamization and missionary activities on the cultural and social structure of Adonara has been profound, giving rise to new religious practices, beliefs, and traditions within the community. The introduction of Islam and Catholicism has influenced various aspects of daily life, including rituals, ceremonies, and social norms, creating a syncretic blend of traditional and Christian elements [29]. This fusion of traditions reflects the dynamic nature of cultural exchange and religious adaptation occurring in a context where diverse religious traditions interact [30].

Over time, the role of Rera-wulan Tana-ekan has evolved to coexist alongside these religions. The harmony between religion and tradition is evident in the social institutions of Adonara. Traditional leaders handle matters related to local customs, while religious leaders such as Imams (Islam) and Bishops (Catholic) oversee religious affairs. Additionally, there are security leaders responsible for managing events like the "Perang Tanding" (ritual combat).

An interesting area of study is how the role of tradition differs within Islam and Catholicism. Villages (Lewo) that adhere to Catholicism still maintain the sacredness of objects and symbols around traditional houses. This is evident in the preservation of the traditional house structure (Koke bale) and nuba-nara (see Figure 2). The traditional houses continue to uphold their sacred forms and meanings, reflecting their historical significance.



Fig. 2. Traditional House of Lewuleleng in Pepageka Village Source: Author's Document

The traditional customs of the Adonara community that practice Islam have taken on a more modern form, with many animal elements and the sacredness of certain objects diminishing somewhat (see Figure 3). Despite this, some places and objects remain sacred. This illustrates how religious influences on traditional customs impact the existence of adat beliefs (Rera-wulan Tana-ekan) within the Adonara community. From a geographical perspective, Islam is predominantly located along the coastal areas of Adonara, while Catholicism is primarily found in the mountainous regions. This distribution suggests that Islam is more frequently engaged with the incoming communities.



Fig. 3. a) Lamahala Defensive House b) Lamahala War Ritual (inside the defensive house) c) Traditional House of Lamahala Village Source: Author's Document

4 Conclusion

The contestation of three forces on Adonara includes adat (adat belief), Catholicism/Islam (foreign religion), and the state. Rera-wulan Tana-ekan as a adat belief in Adonara has been practiced by the local people since their ancestors. After the introduction of foreign religions, Adonara became a site of contestation between religion and government. Adonara people showed resistance to foreign religions because they were considered different from their adat beliefs, namely Rera-wulan Tana-ekan. However, slowly, the people of Adonara began to accept and adopt the teachings of foreign religions as well as related government policies.

The process of integration of foreign religions with adat beliefs often proceeds in diverse ways, including through processes of acculturation, syncretism, and sometimes open conflict. In some cases, the people of Adonara adopted elements from Catholicism or Islam into their traditional belief practices, creating hybrid forms of worship. However, it is not uncommon for tensions and conflicts to also occur, especially when there are attempts to remove or forcibly replace adat beliefs with foreign religious teachings. These conflicts are not only related to religious aspects but also to the cultural and social identity of the Adonara people. The discussion of Religion and Socio-culture in Adonara has the attraction to always be studied further. The cross-cultural diversity and multiculturalism of the people in Adonara is a focus of discussion that deserves to be revisited. Especially the story of Demon and Paji in Adonara which represents the life of the people in Adonara until today.

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