

## Marapu Indigenous Resistance against the Corporation to Protect Land: Perceiving Land through Inter-subjective Cosmology

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### Abstract

The establishment of a sugar cane plantation in East Sumba has evoked conflicts and resistance from the local people. The damage to the *katoda* (sites to perform rituals) portrays one of the other violations causing environmental, cultural, and social damages related to the manipulation of customary land and criminalization of local people. This paper aims to discuss this conflict by accentuating, and also promoting, the paradigm of indigenous religion as a tool to understand the resistance of the Marapu community to protect their land. Indigenous Religion Paradigm implies the inter-subjective relationship between the human person and non-human person (nature) in the non-hierarchical cosmology, which carries the commitments of responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity. By using literature study as the research method, this work shows the opposite perspectives of the partnership between the corporation and the local government concerning the economic considerations and the Marapu community who maintains their inter-subjective cosmology as opposed to the modern economic view. The land is understood differently by each of them. While the former only grasp the monetary side of the land, the latter religiously perceive the land as the source of life for both human and non-human persons and, therefore, protects their land as the commitment to be responsible, ethical, and reciprocal.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the issue of Marapu resistance to the corporation in East Sumba. The community of Marapu, as the indigenous religion of Sumba, has dwelt in their land for centuries with all of their local wisdom. To dwell means not only to occupy but also to maintain and to preserve the land in the sense of inter-subjective relationship with other beings. In recent years, due to the construction of a corporation damaging a sacred place, PT. Muria Sumba Manis, to dwell, for Marapu, must also be to protect. Protecting the land has been the most common issue of indigenous people in the world (Tuhri, 2019). In Indonesia, many indigenous people have been criminalized due to their resistance in protecting and defending their land from the capitalist corporations which got the authority from the government. Michael Northcott argues that this issue of taking the customary land and criminalizing the people has been a common pattern in the conflict between indigenous people and corporations (Northcott, 2020). Samsul Maarif also mentions three indigenous communities, the Ammatoans of Sulawesi, the Kendengs of Central Java, and the Mollos of East Nusa Tenggara, as examples of indigenous people who engaged in environmental preservations and protections (Maarif, 2019, p. 103).

In the case of Marapu of Sumba, certain scholars have conducted their research with various approaches and results. In this part, I mention three of them whose works were taking place in East Sumba and I consider them as the most engaged works on the case study. The first is Dharmaputra Palekahelu who conducted his dissertation research entitled *Marapu: Kekuatan di Balik Kekeringan* (Marapu: The Power behind the Drought) in 2010. He argues that the system of belief of Marapu becomes the power of the community in facing the drought (Palekahelu, 2010). However, due to its background in the development study, this work does not emphasize the religiosity of Marapu in order to equalize it with other religions. The second is Jimmy Marcos who conducted his thesis research entitled *Marapu dalam Bencana Alam: Pemaknaan dan Respons Masyarakat Wunga Sumba Timur* (Marapu in Disaster: Meanings and Responses of Wunga-East Sumba People) in Wunga Village. He argues that Wunga people, of whom 85,4% follow Marapu, have created their own meanings for natural disasters that differ from the views of scholars and from the Indonesian government's policy as the global perspective (Marcos, 2009, p. 1). However, this work still depicts human beings (Marapu people) as having authority over nature in the

cosmology of Marapu. The third is Adelvia Djera who directly led her work to respond to the presence of PT. MSM. She argues that the philosophical concept of East Sumbanese, “*matawai amahu pada njara hamu*”, could be the base for cross-faith communities in finding common ground for harmonizing the life of creation (Djera, 2016, p. 145). This work, although using an indigenous concept in its construction, has not considered Marapu itself as a religious community who has been the victim while their role is actually the most significant in preserving the harmonious life of beings.

Based on those considerations above, this work aims to emphasize more on the religiosity of Marapu, reconstruct the cosmology of Marapu which I argue as inter-subjective one including the way Marapu community perceive the land and promote indigenous values of the Marapu community as the people who have an important role in resisting the corporation, while in the same time, their rights are violated. Firstly, the religiosity of Marapu is an important issue since indigenous religion in Indonesia has been considered as not religious and hence not counted as religion. Secondly, the inter-subjective cosmology of indigenous religions like Marapu is necessary to be understood in order to get a better understanding of why they resist the corporate and try so hard to protect their land. Thirdly, indigenous values have significance in facing the challenges of environmental problems both globally and regionally. These three points are the main purposes of this work in processing those previous studies and the recent situation.

According to those aims, in this paper, I would argue at least three main ideas. First, Indigenous religions such as Marapu should be understood through the paradigm of indigenous religion as the perspective which is suitable and appropriate to the indigenous characteristics. We can no longer impose the dominantly hegemonic perspective which is too essentialist and reductionist in conceiving the indigenous people. Second, I argue that, by using the indigenous religion paradigm, we will find a distinctive kind of cosmology of indigenous people like Marapu, which is inter-subjective cosmology, that has significance in land preservation and protection. Last, I would argue that indigenous knowledge, which has been the base of their resistance, should be empowered as the cultural capital for generating the prosperity of human and non-human beings.

## Literature Review

### Indigenous Religion Paradigm

Indigenous religion is often studied and represented in the framework build on the dominant or major religion as the benchmark which is in the West, Christianity, and in Indonesia, Islam (Maarif, 2016, p. 36). The latest progress of indigenous religion in Indonesia is the decision of the Constitutional Court In 2017, in which they are categorized as *kepercayaan*, differentiated from, but equalized to *agama* (religion) (Bagir, 2020; Maarif et al., 2020). However, the most challenging issue is that the category *kepercayaan* has been considered as non-religious. Maarif argues that this is related to the way religion has been studied (Maarif, 2019, p. 104). In order to provide an alternative perspective to the hegemonic paradigm of world religion, Maarif proposes the indigenous religion paradigm as a more suitable tool to study indigenous religion (Maarif, 2019). He affirms that indigenous religion must be studied and researched with the approach and methodology that are compatible with its characteristics, which are humanistic, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural approaches (Maarif, 2016, p. 49).

There are at least three characteristics of indigenous religion. First, indigenous societies are local, or at least self-contained, and thus have no interest in extending their religious beliefs and practices beyond their own limited environment. Second, they are based primarily on kinship relations, and hence usually have a strong emphasis on ancestors. Third, they transmit their traditions orally, resulting in a fundamentally different attitude towards beliefs and practices than is found amongst traditions derived from and based on authoritative written sources (Cox, 2007, p. 61). With such characteristics that are quite distinctive to the dominant framework of religion, three approaches from Maarif find their relevance to the study of indigenous religion (Maarif, 2016).

The humanistic approach implies that every idea and activity of a person or community being studied should be understood as a form of human creativity. In social science research methodology, this humanistic perspective is called an empirical study which is research that focuses on the history and experiences of the daily life of a community as a condition for understanding a community, including its religion. The interdisciplinary approach implies that religion is a complex phenomenon of human beings that is always related to other dimensions.

Finally, the cross-cultural approach demands the need for a dialogue between researchers and those under study. Researchers have to recognize that they also have their own culture which is built up through the process of their life history, as well as those who are being researched (Maarif, 2016, pp. 41–43). All these three approaches are meant to overcome the hegemony of the world religion paradigm which tends to be exclusive and hence excludes indigenous religion from the category of religion.

### **Inter-subjective Cosmology**

As mentioned before, the indigenous religion paradigm is the alternative to the problematic world religion paradigm that has been hegemonic. What is called World Religion Paradigm here is not the world religion itself such as Islam or Christianity, but rather the way religion itself has been understood as constructed by the academics (Bagir, 2016). Genealogically speaking, this stems from the reification of religion from *religio* or religious (adjective) to *religion* (of Christianity) and then (world) *religions* (Smith, 1964). It then tends to be narrow and exclusive especially for the non-western religion (King, 2001; Maarif, 2017; Masuzawa, 2005). Maarif compares those paradigms by investigating each of their worldviews, in which the world religion paradigm is characterized with “subject-object” cosmology while the indigenous religion paradigm is characterized with “subject-subject” cosmology (Maarif, 2019, p. 109). The world religion paradigm implies that there are three categories of beings occupying the cosmos: supernatural (God), culture (human beings), and nature. Those three are in a hierarchical relationship in which the supernatural is more powerful than the culture and the culture is more powerful than nature. Humans are dependent on the omni-powerful supernatural, which determines all fates of culture and nature. Consequently, human beings and nature are to ‘worship’ god. It also implies that only human beings possess capabilities of thinking and culturing, whereas nature does not. Hence, the human is the subject, and nature is the object (Maarif, 2019, p. 111).

Meanwhile, the inter-subjective cosmology of the indigenous religion paradigm, as Maarif suggests, implies that subject or person is not limited but extended beyond human beings, so non-human beings may also do “culturing”. For indigenous people, being religious is being engaged in inter-subjective relations with attitudes and behaviors as the most important factors (see Picard, 2011). That relationship carries the commitments of responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity. First,

the responsible commitment implies that “what I do would affect me.” If a subject or person does not properly carry this commitment in their attitudes and behaviors, it would affect the well-being of the subject itself. Second, the ethical commitment implies that “what I do would affect others.” Hence, the subject should consider proper attitudes and behaviors that contribute to the well-being of others. Third, the reciprocal commitment implies that “what I give is what I take, or what I take is what I give.” In this sense, offering and sharing are important factors. A subject would obtain something, good or bad when they offer something. To conclude, in the inter-subjective cosmology, the well-being of a subject is dependent on the well-being of other subjects, and hence, for indigenous people, to be religious is to be responsible, ethical, and reciprocal (Maarif, 2019).

### **Indigenous Resistance to Corporation to Protect the Land**

As mentioned before, inter-subjective cosmology has a huge significance in land preservation and protection. Michael Northcott argues that, in comparison to modern science, indigenous religions and cultures have a better record than modern industrial societies in managing nonhuman-human relationships in ways that neither create pandemics nor ecological destruction (Northcott, 2021). The indigenous peoples’ ancestral ‘guardianship’ of forests and other habitats demonstrate a better historical record of conservation of the integrity of ecosystems, and the diversity of species within them (Northcott, 2021). The developments in the study of human ecology indicate the ‘polycentric’ relationships between people and their habitats sustain the biodiversity and hence resilience of ecosystems. It is not characterized by modern agriculture and food provision, large economic corporations, and state agencies, but by a range of taboos, traditions, social agreements, rules, institutions, and customs which evolved over time in diverse ways as suited to the diverse ecological conditions of different human ecological habitats (Northcott, 2020, p. 95).

For Northcott, the principal cause of civil conflict in Indonesia is land expropriation by corporate and government agencies or what he calls the modern partnership between states and capitalist corporations. The corporations use their great wealth, and their lobbying and monetary influence over parliamentary and governmental executive processes, to pursue their environmentally destructive developments (Northcott, 2015, p. 72). In this case, resistance to corporate power is an essential tactic in the recovery of place, and that religious tradition is a

potentially powerful source of such resistance. An important idea that Northcott provides us can also be grasped in the point about ‘parochial ecology.’ In that, he offers what he calls ‘parochial ecology’ in which communities of place, when facing the universalizing hegemony of State and corporate actors, recover a collective sense of responsibility for their own locale, including the nature that depicts the pathways and rituals of local community life. This parochial ecology is not the opposite of the secular, but as the consciousness of the commonality of createdness that persons share with other creatures, and of the relationality of the human quest for transcendence to the emplaced habitats that the earth affords for that quest to find ritual and communal expression (Northcott, 2015, p. 101).

## **Methods**

I choose the literature study of indigenous religion because in Indonesia it is still necessary due to the fact the indigenous religion has been discriminated against for years and considered as not religious, backward, primitive, and animist. I take the study case of Marapu resistance to the corporation because it is a concrete case that I considered as the tip of the iceberg of the problem of indigenous religion in Indonesia. Besides, the resistance is still ongoing up to now, and not all Sumbanese support the resistance due to the modern knowledge and modern economic perspective which have dominated the public discourse and displaced the indigenous knowledge. This work is qualitative research that explores and critically examines the case study of indigenous resistance of Marapu in East Sumba. The data are collected from online sources which are articles and news, and library sources which are previous field researches in East Sumba. The three main patterns used in this work are providing the description of the problem, critically exploring the impacts and factors of the problem, and constructively determining the responses or solutions to the problem.

## **Rise of Conflict**

PT. Muria Sumba Manis was established in November 2014 as the result of the collaboration of two giant corporations, PT. Djarum as the major stockholders (75%) and PT. Wings Group. This corporation is a part of the sugar sovereignty program in 2024 planned by President Jokowi since 2014 when the deficit in demand for sugar was 1,1 million tons per year. In April 2015, this corporation got the location permit of 52.817 hectares of land. One year after, they got the principal permit with an investment plan of Rp. 9,5 trillion in June 2016. Five months

later, in November 2016, they got the land use permit of 19.000 hectares of land in East Sumba. They finally started the construction of the plantation in April 2018. A year after that, in April 2019, the permit was extended to be 41.000 hectares of land (Silalahi, 2020). The main problem is that this land includes the customary land or the sacred place of the Marapu people.

The main narrations that emerged in public are that the land is rocky and infertile due to the short rain season causing drought every year. So, the government let the corporation with their modern technology occupy the land to make it productive and useful for the sake of the state (sugar sovereignty) and the region itself (economic growth). It was confirmed by the speech of the governor of East Nusa Tenggara at that time. On the opening day of the construction, the governor said that the NTT provincial government, thank the corporation for the courage of PT MSM in building a sugar factory and sugar cane plantation in East Sumba which he considered as a reckless investment because they dare to invest on rocky ground (Jatmiko, 2018). This statement also represents those who have been hired on the plantation. In contrast to Marapu people who, with the support of several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), resist the corporation, those people resist the presence of NGOs in East Sumba, which they consider have made a cleavage in society. They support the plantation because it has changed the rocky land to be a productive plantation (Analodu, 2018).

However, the Marapu community actually has had their own ways in adapting to the drought problem, which is only one of several ecological phenomena they been faced, by conducting their ritual-based agriculture (Palekahelu, 2010, p. 166), but the construction of the plantation has damaged their sacred place (*katoda*) for doing ritual and the forest which is the place for livestock and agriculture. The construction also has worsened the drought because of water privatization for the plantation which needs much water (Azhar et al., 2019). This is the cause of Marapu's resistance to the corporate power that appears in the form of several protests for years. The sign of their resistance is the criminalization of the Marapu people who defend their land. After a couple of months of being in jail, three Marapu people were officially sentenced to prison by the court in December 2020.

The regent of East Sumba said that this conflict happens because of the problem of informal payment for land (*uang sirih pinang*), which was not given to all clans. However, for Marapu people, the corporation has manipulated the *uang sirih pinang* as the payment for land while for them, *sirih pinang* (betel nut) is a symbol of respect. Certain Marapu people admitted that they got the money but they did not think that it would be a payment for selling their land to PT. MSM. On another side, PT. MSM does not say anything about this except restating that their licensing process and company operations have followed the procedure (Silalahi, 2020).

The resistance of the Marapu community in protecting their land is inseparable from their indigenous system of belief and worldview. In the cosmology of Marapu, *Tana* (land) is very central. It is the center of the cosmos. This is based on the oral story about the earliest ancestors of Sumbanese. It is believed that those ancestors are travelers, who have spent much time sailing on the ocean until finally, they found Sumba Island (Marcos, 2013, p. 73). *Tana* is the unity of the ecosystem, not only the land but also the creatures and beings upon it. Marapu people believe that *Tana* is the source of life and the events in the land and life on it are a form of correction or a consequence of the relationship between *tau* (humans) and Marapu. Their belief in Marapu encourages them to perceive natural resources around them as the source of life (Palekahelu, 2010, p. 202). Natural processes that are centered on land, in which humans are an important part of it, have provided space for Marapu to exist beyond existing materials or infrastructure. In addition, ritual and mythology, as instruments to maintain their religious belief, result in respectful practices on nature, responsible use of it, and encouragement to preserve it (Marcos, 2013, p. 235). Hence, the interaction between human beings and their nature and ecological phenomena has shaped their indigenous system of knowledge.

Considering the significant values of the cosmology of Marapu, as Marcos suggests, the first aid the government should give to the Marapu community is the security of *tana*, which is the ecosystem including its dwellers (Marcos, 2013, p. 177). Then, in order to increase the prosperity of the local people, instead of inviting the capitalist corporate investment which neglects the local values, the government should empower the potency that the local people have such as livestock. Palekahelu's suggestion is also important, that, in designing the development program, the government should pay attention to the local values, local knowledge, and the system of belief of

the Marapu community, as the cultural modals, which have sustained them in facing the ecological problem such as drought and famine for years (Palekahelu, 2010, p. 244).

### **Understanding Marapu**

The situation in which the Marapu community stands alone against the corporation licensed and supported by the government, laborers, and people concerning economic considerations, represents the deeper problem of religious life in Indonesia. Marapu, as an indigenous religion with their worldviews, is not supported by society. It indicates that they are still considered inferior to the world religion and modern society, just precisely as experienced by most indigenous religions in Indonesia which cannot be called *agama* but *kepercayaan* (Hefner, 2021; Maarif, 2017; Maarif et al., 2020). The modern people only understand Marapu through their own hegemonic perspective which is constructed in academic discourse, religious space, and the public sphere. Using that perspective, they have been failed to understand the Marapu community and its distinguished local values, which are actually part of Sumbanese cultural values and knowledge. This failure could be seen as the success of the corporation in imposing its modern economic view on the government. Consequently, this modern partnership between the government and the capitalist corporation has strengthened the hegemonic paradigm of society (see Blok & Torben, 2011; Nasr, 1968; Tuhri, 2019).

The discussion above confirms the need for a more inclusive paradigm. As I have argued before, the indigenous religion like Marapu should be understood through the indigenous religion paradigm which is more appropriate with the characteristic of indigenous religion. Using this paradigm, we could grasp the worldview of Marapu in perceiving their land as the opposite understanding to the modern economic view of the capitalist corporation. If the society has understood properly the perspective of the Marapu community, they will be aware that they actually have a pearl of rich local wisdom that could help them maintain the well-being of creatures, not only increasing the prosperity of the people. Consequently, it would have a huge significance in positioning Marapu in society, so that the Marapu community is not being inferior anymore and has an equal position as citizen and as a religion in Indonesia.

### **Land Protection as Religious Commitments**

The resistance of the Marapu community in protecting their land, as I said before, is inseparable from their cosmology and worldview. Their strong resistance which has sent three of them to jail implies that what they do is not merely the problem of money. Instead, it is a sign of serious commitment to protecting the land, which is central in their life. They perceive land differently from the state-licensed corporation. The way Marapu perceives their land is distinctive to the dominantly common paradigm. The government and some people only grasp the monetary values of land. The land is only seen as long as it is productive and useful to fulfill the needs of human beings. It assures that the modern economic perspective has been imposed on the government and modern society. The “subject-object” relationship between human beings and nature is perennially maintained. In short, this indicates that the hierarchical cosmology of the world religion paradigm is still hegemonic in public discourse.

Using the inter-subjective cosmology of the indigenous religion paradigm, we will understand that the Marapu community protects the land as the attempt to maintain their religious commitments, responsibility, ethics, and reciprocity, which are carried in their “subject-subject” relationship with other persons or beings. First, their commitment of responsibility could be understood when, based on their mythology, the Marapu people believe that they cannot exploit nature excessively, because it would have a negative impact on their life. In consequence, they use it sufficiently and efficiently by giving the same access to all. Second, their commitment of ethics could be seen in their system of belief, in which Marapu people have certain prohibitions in their relationship with nature as non-human beings. For example, they cannot cut the trees around the spring and they consider it as sacred so they even cannot speak too loud in there. To cut certain trees, they have to do a ritual first to ask permission from the ancestors. Third, their commitment of reciprocity is shown in their act of protecting land. They believe that to get the well-being of their selves, they have to preserve the well-being of other-selves (nature). This interrelation is the manifestation of their belief in Marapu as maintained and renewed through ritual (Lattu, 2019). To conclude, I argue that these three commitments are inseparable, and protecting the land could be seen as the peak of these religious commitments.

### **The Significance of Marapu Perspective**

The way the Marapu community adapts to the ecological phenomena is based on their indigenous knowledge maintained by doing rituals and transmitting mythology (see Cox, 1998; Lattu, 2019). In facing the problem of drought, which becomes the reason for those who support the corporation, Wunga people conduct their ritual-based agriculture and communal practices (Palekahelu, 2010, p. 144). The former emphasizes the importance of ritual or *hamayangu* to keep in touch with their ancestors, Marapu, while the latter emphasizes the importance of togetherness or *pawandang*. To this extent, ritual and mythology become important in maintaining the indigenous system of knowledge of the Marapu community. It confirms what Cox argues as the indigenous which the entire system is based on tradition and authority, which are transmitted intergenerationally through story and ritual, and confirmed by the deeply held beliefs that dictate how communities are organized and how their customary rules are enforced (Cox, 2007, p. 138). In short, *hamayang* and *pawandang* have been the power of the Marapu community in maintaining the well-being of their selves and the well-being of others.

The role of the Marapu community in sustaining the environment is very significant and should be empowered by the government. The resilience of the Marapu community in the midst of ecological problems such as drought confirms what Northcott argues as the success of the polycentric relationship in sustaining the environment, which is not characterized by modern agriculture or large economic corporation, but by a set of cultural systems. To this extent, it is shown that the way of increasing the prosperity of people is not only by using modern economic perspectives and technologies. The indigenous knowledge of the Marapu community, for example, could significantly be the guidance of the development program of the government. It also has significance in providing people the necessary perspective on ecology to overcome the environmental problem, which is faced globally and regionally.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown the resistance of the Marapu community to the corporation in order to protect their land. Using the indigenous religion paradigm, it has been clear that Marapu, as an indigenous religion, is surely religious and should be counted as religion or as equal to religion or *agama* in Indonesia, so it could end the religious identity-based discrimination and exclusion they have experienced for so long in many aspects of citizenship. It is proved by examining their

resistance which represents their attempt to maintain their responsible, ethical, and reciprocal commitments in their inter-subjective relations with other beings. Those religious commitments also have a significant role in land protection and preservation. As I have argued, it also could be the guidance of the government in attempting the prosperity of people. To this extent, instead of persisting in their modern economic perspective and neglecting the local wisdom, the government needs to shift their paradigm so that they could properly understand the Marapu community. By doing so, the government also could stand together with their people, and not make a “modern partnership between states and capitalist corporation.” In short, this paper has accentuated the religiosity of Marapu, its religious commitments in their inter-subjective cosmology, and its significance in ecological and social discourses.

Nevertheless, this paper is limitedly focusing on the indigenous cosmology and resistance to corporate power. It does not explore the detailed process of how the monetary influence of the capitalist corporation has been imposed on the government and society and how the modern partnership of government and corporation was formed and is maintained. In relation to Marapu, this work focuses on a specific community in East Sumba and a specific case of the construction of a plantation in customary lands. Consequently, further research on indigenous religions generally, and Marapu specifically, is very necessary, considering the struggle and the progress of indigenous religion in Indonesian public discourse. I suggest that further research on indigenous religion should pay attention to other challenges in the contemporary world such as ecology, in order to accentuate the significance of the indigenous perspective. For further research on Marapu, I would suggest that it should be more concerned with the diversity of Marapu itself in order to avoid the generalized discourse of Marapu because there is not only one kind of Marapu in Sumba. This is related to the fact that Sumba itself has more than one culture, language, and perhaps worldview. Lastly, it is also important to examine how a hegemonic paradigm could be formed and maintained in academic discourse, religious space, and public sphere including the paradigm of development proposed by the government.

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