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INTERRELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY WITHIN THE HUAULU COMMUNITY IN MALUKU

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of Western Christianity in the archipelago, alongside European expansion, solidified Christian dominance and asserted superiority over indigenous religious practices. European supremacy did not merely bolster this dominance but also fueled theological narratives that portrayed indigenous religions as "dark" and "heretical," necessitating their conversion to Christianity. This framework shaped interfaith discourse, marginalizing indigenous religions and excluding them from meaningful engagement. This article aims to analyze the socio-religious engagement between the adherents of Memaham (an indigenous religion) and Christians in the context of interreligious relations. This research was conducted within the Huaulu indigenous community, North Seram District, Central Maluku Regency, Maluku Province. This study employs a participatory qualitative research methodology, using interviews and observations as data generation methods. The findings reveal that Memaham, as the indigenous religion of the Huaulu, experienced a complex and dynamic engagement with Christianity, such as harmonious collaboration, ongoing negotiation, and even direct confrontation. Those findings provide an empirical contribution to interreligious relations within a postcolonial context, by aiming to avoid the romanticization often oriented towards harmonious relationships.

Keywords*:* Interreligious Engagement; Indigenous Religion; Christianity

INTRODUCTION

Interreligious relations are frequently constrained within the world religions paradigm (Paais, 2023a). Engagement among adherents of Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism are commonly regarded as interreligious dialogue. In contrast, relationships with adherents of indigenous religion are often framed as interaction with primitive culture, irreligious society, and animistic practices (see Tylor, 1871). This paradigm is deeply rooted in the socio-theological construct of Western supremacy, which perpetuates the triumphalism of world religions as inherently superior

to indigenous religion (Cox, 2007; Smith, 1964). Christianity exemplified this dynamic with its extensive history of missionary activities—including proselytization, evangelization, or christianization—on a global scale (Patty 2019, p. 14). By emphasizing exclusive doctrinal creeds such as "Jesus is the only way of salvation and life", alongside the Great Commission, Christianity has established a hegemonic and dominant presence. These same creeds have often been employed to legitimize efforts to christianize adherents of indigenous religion in various contexts (Paais, 2022). Although indigenous religions in Indonesia were granted formal-legal recognition through Constitutional Court Decision Number 97/PUU-XIV/2016 in 2017 (Mubarok, 2019), the prevailing *status quo* continues to marginalize their adherents in social, religious, and political spheres (Anggraeni et al., 2022; Marshall, 2018; Nenohai, 2023).

Numerous studies have analyzed the relationship between indigenous religions and Christianity in various contexts. Junsal Efendy Duan, focusing on Tobelo community, argues that the adoption of *Gikiri Moi* (Tobelo's conception of the highest supernatural being) and its identification with the Christian God constitutes a practice that diminishes the intrinsic meaning of *Gikiri Moi* itself (Duan, 2019). A similar observation is made by Jear Nenohai in his study of the *Liturgi Bulan Budaya* (LBB) in the Evangelical Christian Church in Timor (GMIT). LBB is intended as an effort to contextualize Christian faith through dialogue with cultural practices. However, Nenohai critiques the LBB practice for perpetuating discriminatory narratives against indigenous religions. According to him, LBB merely associates indigenous religious practices as "culture" that enriches Christian theology, without genuinely incorporating the perspective of indigenous religious adherents (Nenohai, 2023). These subordinating Christian narratives are historically rooted in the methods of Christian proselytization, which systematically marginalized the indigenous religion. Elifas Maspaitella highlights various missionary approaches, from Portuguese Catholic missionaries to Dutch Protestant zending in Maluku. Protestantism had the greatest influence on Maluku's Christian religiosity by employing coercive methods, referred to locally as *main larang* (imposing prohibition). Such prohibition included banning the use of local languages, forbidding visits to old villages (*kampung lama*), prohibiting practices such as chewing betel nut, and others (Maspaitella, 2020).

In Africa, practices such as "witchcraft", often associated with notions of primitiveness, persist and exhibit a correlation with modernity. The emergence and growth of Pentecostal churches across Africa, particularly in Malawi, have been implicated in efforts to eradicate these practices. Pentecostal theology

often reinterprets local spiritual beliefs as satanic, leading to the organization of large-scale services aimed at expelling or "releasing" these perceived evil spirits (Dijk, 2001). Moreover, the actors discriminating against indigenous religions are nor limited to adherents of world religion, but also include the state, which exerts control through various bureaucratic regulations (Abdillah & Izah, 2022). Furthermore, scholars have sought to engage indigenous religion in various discourse. For instance, Krisharyanto Umbu Deta endeavors to position indigenous religion within the religious freedom (Deta, 2022); Vikry Paais reconstruct Christians exclusive narrative towards indigenous religion and propose a pluralistic approach (Paais, 2022); similarly, Kristno Saptenno encourages for the inclusion of indigenous religion in interreligious dialogue (Saptenno, 2021).

After reviewing the various studies, the Author finds that these studies have not adequately navigated the relationship between adherents of indigenous religion and Christianity in daily life. Therefore, this article will analyze the relationship between Memaham (indigenous religion) and Christianity, with a focus on the perspectives and practices of Huaulu indigenous communities, in Seram Island, Central Maluku Regency—the place where this research is conducted. Grounded in the socio-religious relations of the people, this paper explores the dynamics of their engagement based on intersubjective, egalitarian, reciprocal, and dynamic relationships. This article seeks to avoid the romanticized language which tends to elevate interreligious relations within a discourse of harmony, such as the discourse of "interreligious dialogue" that often masks conflicts (Wijsen, 2007, p. 45). Therefore, it emphasizes that interreligious engagements are dynamic, not merely characterized by harmonious experiences, but also generating resistance and conflict in response to hegemony and domination. In short, this article seeks to go beyond the post-colonial study of interreligious relations that tends to avoid conflict. Consequently, the correlational dialogue proposed by Paul Knitter (2008) will be employed as an effort to emancipate indigenous religion as a subject within interreligious discourse, while also bridging its relationship with Christianity as a correlational one.

This article employs a qualitative research methodology, combining several data generating methods, including in-depth interview, semi-structured life-world interview, active participant observation, and literature study. Each method applied proportionally and contextually. Additionally, this article utilizes phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological analysis is used to understand and explain the meaning and structure of a phenomenon, as well as the essence of an individual's or a community's experience (Patton, 2002).

In this context, the engagement between Memaham and Christianity will be associated with the interaction between the people with different religious affiliation. Their engagement generates a complex socio-religious dynamic, including reciprocal negotiation and resistance that intertwine.

The structure of analysis in this article is divided into three sections: (1) exploring Memaham as an indigenous religious identity; (2) examining the existence and nature of Christianity; and (3) analyzing the dynamic engagement between the adherents of Memaham and Christianity. The research reveals that Memaham, as indigenous religious practices predating Islam and Christianity, is referred to as Hindu in administrative context for socio-political and recognition purposes. Over time, Memaham adherents encountered Christian (*Asaranyam*) and Islamic (*Laufaha*) communities. In the context of Christianity, its arrival in Huaulu reflects a dialogical social relationship between Huaulu (insider) and other people (outsider), with practices like interfaith marriage and religious conversion playing a key role in shaping these dynamics. This interaction enables hybridization and assimilation of identity between Memaham and Christian adherents. For instance, Memaham adherents who have converted to Christian do not entirely abandon Memaham practices and knowledge; conversely, Christians who convert to Memaham do not entirely relinquish Christian practices and knowledges. In addition, in social interaction and collective work, both are in an intersubjective relationship. Christians and Memaham both occupy strategic positions, both in *adat* government and village government. While such harmonious exchanges are evident, Christian evangelization efforts (christianization), legitimized by exclusive creeds, provoke resistance from Memaham adherents. This resistance underscores their resilience against coercive conversion and the subordinate nature of Christianity. Thus, the encounter between Memaham and Christianity is dynamic, characterized by both harmonious engagement and conflictual rejection.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AMONG THE HUAULU

Huaulu is an indigenous village situated on Seram Island, in the mountainous region at the foothills of Mount Binaiya, and surrounded by tropical forests. Administratively, Huaulu is part of North Seram Subdistrict, Central Maluku Regency, Maluku Province. The settlement consists of four main areas: (1) *Kampung Lama*; (2) *Kampung Baru*; (3) *Kilo Lima* or transmigration settlement; and (4) Alakamat, which is located along the northern coast of Seram Island. For the purposes of this study, the term "Huaulu" refers collectively to Kampung Lama and Kampung Baru, which the Huaulu people

call *Mutulam*. Kampung Lama and Kampung Baru are adjacent, with a paved road marking their boundary and passing only through Kampung Baru. Kampung Lama maintains its traditional architectural style, characterized by stilt houses constructed with wooden planks and *gaba-gaba* (sago palm fronds), bamboo or *nibong* flooring, and sago leaf roofs. In contrast, Kampung Baru exhibits features of modernity, such as concrete houses that imitate urban architectural designs. Nevertheless, traces of modern influences, including electricity, televisions, solar panels, and motorized vehicles, are present in Kampung Lama[1]; while traditional stilt houses can still be found in Kampung Baru. A defining feature of Huaulu culture is the red cloth headgear known as *asope* (Ambon Malay: *kain berang*), exclusively worn by adult men who have undergone the *puheli* ritual, a rite of passage. Daily practices among the Huaulu include chewing betel nut, which accompanies various activities such as socializing with neighbors, farming, or hunting in the forest.

In Huaulu, there are three religions or beliefs coexist: *Memaham* (indigenous religion), *Asaranyam* (Christianity), and *Laufaha* (Islam) (see Paais, 2023a; Valeri, 2000). The majority of Huaulu people adhere to Memaham, followed by Christianity, and Islam as the smallest population.

Figure 1
The Map of Seram Island, Maluku Province

Source: earth.google.com

Memaham as (Indigenous) Religion

Following the 2017 Constitutional Court which recognized indigenous religions, several scholars have sought to reconstruct various indigenous religions as an integral part of religious discourse in Indonesia (Deta, 2022;

[1] During my visit to Huaulu in October 2024, I found that the Huaulu people had prohibited vehicle access to Kampung Lama, marking it with a plaque clearly stating this prohibition.

Nawangsari & Adnin, 2022; Saptenno, 2021; Tera & Palar, 2018). This reconstruction forms a part of an emancipatory effort to assert the equality of indigenous religions with other official religions. Similarly, the Author cautiously engages this effort, recognizing the need to critically interrogate how religious discourse is constructed and reproduced.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1964) elucidates how the term "religion" has been reified, particularly under the influence on monotheistic traditions, most notably Christianity. This process of reification has not only obscured the multifaceted nature of religious experiences but has also fostered reductive definitions that dominate global discourse. Within the Indonesian context, this phenomenon is further accentuated by the imposition of monotheistic paradigm (conducted by Islam) as prerequisites for religious recognition (Maarif, 2017). Such prerequisites—including the necessity of a prophet, a sacred text, and international recognition—reflect efforts to impose monotheistic framework onto belief systems that are not intrinsically non-monotheistic. Recognizing this epistemological problem, categorizing indigenous beliefs as "religion" risks reifying its practices that are inherently fluid and dynamic. To circumvent this conceptual impasse, a more inclusive definition of religion is essential. This study adopt James L. Cox definition in *From Primitive to Indigenous*, which posits:

> "Religion refers to identifiable communities that base their beliefs and experiences of postulated non-falsifiable realities on a tradition that is transmitted authoritatively from generation to generation" (Cox 2007, p. 85).

By focusing on religious experience as transmitted within a community, Cox's definition eschews theological-essentialist justification. This conceptual framework provides a foundation for integrating Memaham into interreligious discourse more inclusively.

Memaham, as a belief system predating the arrival of formal religions, is often referred to as Hindu. However, this Hindu does not correspond to Indian Hinduism but is instead understood as *adat* or ancient Hindu (Ambon Malay: *Hindu tua*). In the social imagination of the Maluku people, Hindu frequently serves as a term to denote indigenous religions outside the six officially recognized religions. Aholiab Watloly (2013) identifies this as *Hindu kultural*, a form of Hindu intertwined with the tradition and culture of Maluku, making it unique and absent elsewhere.

Administratively, Memaham is not listed as a religious option in the Identity

Card (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk*—KTP); instead, Hindu is used. Some sources suggest that this practice stems from the political upheaval and mass killing of Indonesian Communist Party members and sympathizers in 1965 (Damm, 2015; Paais, 2023a). At the moment, indigenous religions were not officially recognized, leaving their adherents vulnerable to accusations of being atheist or communist affiliates (Maarif, 2017). As a result, labeling their belief as Hindu became a strategy for negotiating religious identity during this politically volatile period. There are, however, suggestions that the identification of indigenous religions with Hindu predates 1965, stemming from the historical influence of Hindu-Buddhist religious-culture in *Nusantara* (Bartels, 2017). This historical context extended into the Dutch colonization period, during which the term "Hindu" was often used in the administrative affairs by the colonial government to refer to groups of people outside the major world religions (Ellen, 2015). Amid this complexity, the use of Hindu serves an essential function for Memaham adherents, enabling them to navigate the challenges of administrative identity, political rights, and public service accessibility.

The religiosity of Memaham adherents is oriented toward the internalization of earth and sky as spiritual values. They are known as *Ina Puhum* (Mother Earth) and *Ama Lahatala* (Father Sky), collectively referred to as *Ina-Ama* (mother and father) (Valeri, 2001, p. 94). In Huaulu cosmology, *Ina Puhum* and *Ama Lahatala* represent entities believed to influence human life, providing protections, fertilities, and even calamities. Rituals and prayers are therefore directed toward these entities. Practically, *Ina Puhum* is mentioned first, followed by *Ama Lahatala*. This sequence underscores the ecological relationship between the Huaulu and their surrounding environment, particularly the forest and land. According to local narratives, the ground they walk on, the soil they cultivate, the forest that provides sustenance, and the flowing rivers that sustain life are all representations of *Ina Puhum*. This worldview reflects a perception of nature as a nurturing mother (see Merchant, 1980). By highlighting *Ina Puhum*, the Huaulu emphasize the ecological harmony while asserting that humans are not the sole subject inhabiting the earth, but are part of an intersubjective network with other entities, including nature. Thus, Memaham cosmology encourages ecological relations as intersubjective, highlighting the interconnectedness between human, nature and ancestor within a framework of mutual existence (see Maarif, 2019).

The intersubjective relationships are further regulated through prohibitions known as *maquwoli* (taboo). These taboos not only regulate human-to-human relationships but also the relationship between humans and nature, and humans

and their ancestors. In human-to-human relationships, a younger sibling is prohibited from marrying before an older sibling. In relation to nature, the Huaulu are strictly forbidden from consuming domesticated animals (such as dogs and cats)[2], including wild animals that have been domesticated. Even hunters are not allowed to consume their game animals. In the relationship with ancestors, the Huaulu have a tradition of *nama Hindu*. A *nama Hindu* is an ancestral name passed down to subsequent generations. If descendants inherit this name, the taboos practiced by the ancestors automatically inherited as well. For instance, *Lafale* is the name of an ancestor who refrained from eating pork. Therefore, any descendants who carry the name *Lafale* are also forbidden from consuming pork.

The entire practice of Memaham rituals is centered in *lumapotoam* (Ambon Malay: *baileo*). *Lumapotoam* is a larger structure designed to accommodate numerous participants, as it functions as both a space for deliberation and the central venue for ritual activities. The architectural design and construction of the *lumapotoam* preserve local knowledge and traditions. The use of tools, other than machetes, is strictly prohibited in the construction of the building. The wooden joints are fastened using rattan ropes, as the use of nails is not permitted. Traditionally, building is overseen by an elder known as *tua adat*. The elder serves for a specific term and the position is rotated among members of different clans. As of 2024, Mahuleti Tamatae holds the position of elder for the Huaulu *lumapotoam*. In this context, the role of the elder is distinct from that of the *raja* (village leader). While the *raja* is responsible for administrative matters within the village, the elder is tasked with overseeing religious and customary affairs. Accordingly, some informants suggest that the position and duties of the elder within Memaham resemble those of a pastor in Christian contexts. Additionally, in matters pertaining to land or territorial rights, the Huaulu recognize the *Latunusa* (land king) as the individual most responsible. The division of roles and responsibilities is, therefore, a crucial factor in the functioning of Memaham within the Huaulu community.

In recent decades, various external pressures have posed serious challenges to the existence of Memaham adherents. These challenges include the state's unequal recognition of religions (Maarif, 2017), which has led to the stigmatization of Memaham as an animistic belief and its followers as primitive or even irreligious. This recognition bias has resulted in various imbalanced policies, such as the Ministry of Social Affairs' program that categorized the

[2] Valerio Valeri (1992) notes that chickens were also considered domestic animals that should not be consumed. However, over time, the Huaulu community has shifted to consuming chicken meat.

Huaulu community as an "isolated tribe" (*suku terasing*) requiring relocation. This policy, however, eliminated the customary order of the Huaulu society (Topatimasang, 2016). Furthermore, the implementation of transmigration programs and the reclassification of customary forests into national parks have created equally complex issues. Transmigration, which was claimed to boost regional income, has instead exacerbated social disparities between indigenous populations and migrants. Additionally, conservation efforts have excluded forest-dependent communities from accessing essential resources derived from the forest (Sasaoka, 2018).

The Existence of Christianity (*Asaranyam*)

The arrival of Christianity in Huaulu is inextricably linked to the social encounter between the followers of Memaham (insiders) and those of Christianity (outsiders). The earliest record of this encounter between both in Huaulu was documented by Italian anthropologist, Valerio Valeri, in the 1980s (Valeri, 2000). Valeri notes that Christians were referred to as *Asaranyam*. This term was used to distinguish the religious identity of Christians from that of the followers of Memaham, who were regarded as the mountain dwellers and the original settlers of the area.

During the period of Valeri's research, Christians were a distinct community living in proximity to the Huaulu. Over time, their interaction has become more widespread and intensive. Today, the presence of Christians has become an integral part of the Huaulu collective identity. Through marriage and migration, Christian adherents have settled in the region and formed social cohesion alongside the Memaham adherents. Several Christian informants explained that they settled in Huaulu primarily due to marriage, while others cited owning land in the area as their reason for relocation. These individuals originated from various villages such as Maneo, Maraina, Kanikeh, Roho, Hatu, Selumena, and others.

Christians in Huaulu are affiliated to The Protestant Church in the Moluccas (*Gereja Protestan Maluku*—GPM),[3] and most of them are the member of Oping Congregation (*Jemaat* Oping). In church administration, the Oping Congregation is one of the congregations in the Classis of Seram Utara Barat, located on the northern coast of Seram Island and is in close proximity to one of the Huaulu settlements, Alakamat. This congregation is gathered by the Congregational Council, which is led by a priest and assisted by several

[3] Maluku Protestant Church in the Moluccas, or known as *Gereja Protestan Maluku* (GPM) is Calvinist church which introduced by Dutch zendeling. GPM territory include Maluku and North Maluku.

elders (*penatua*) and deacons (*diaken*). As of 2023, two members of Oping Congregational Council are Huaulu people who reside in Kampung Baru.

In the context of ritual practice, the Oping Congregation operates two buildings designated as centers for worship. The first is the church building situated in the central area of Oping Village, while the second is a spiritual hall constructed in the Kilo Lima area. The establishment of the spiritual hall in Kilo Lima differs from the church in the village center, as it aims to provide more accessible opportunities for Christians residing in Kilo Lima and Huaulu to engage in worship. However, not all Huaulu Christians participate in the worship services. During the Author's participation, only five to six people were present, none of whom were Huaulu residents from Kampung Lama or Kampung Baru. This limited attendance can be attributed to the considerable distance and prohibitively high transportation costs. The journey from Huaulu to Kilo Lima spans approximately 15 kilometers southwest, and due to the absence of public transportation, Huaulu residents are required to pay around Rp25,000 for a one-way trip via motorcycle taxi. Consequently, the round-trip cost amounts to Rp50,000, a significant sum when compared to the incomes of the community, which relies on the unpredictable yields of natural resources.

In addition to issues of cost and transportation, the time of worship, which is sometimes not punctual, also contributes to the lack of participation among Christian members. The Author has observed on several occasions that worship services often begin later than the scheduled time of 9:00 AM. As a result, some individuals prefer to go to the garden to work rather than attend the worship service. This phenomenon indicates that participation in Christian rituals is not considered a mandatory routine. In contrast, during traditional ceremonies, Christian Huaulu living far from Huaulu tend to make an effort to attend and participate. This pattern reflects a clear distinction between the religious practices of Memaham and Christianity. Christianity, with its fixed and scheduled rituals, demands more consistent participation, while in Memaham, religious practices are more flexible and not bound by strict routines.

Despite the various contemporary dynamics surrounding Christianity in Huaulu, the Author also seeks to highlight how the adherents of Memaham are not exempt from the influence of global Christianity, which emphasizes exclusive creed, orthodoxy, and soteriology (see Aritonang & Steenbrink, 2008; Ellen, 2015; End, 1999; Maspaitella, 2020). The textual affirmation of creeds has made Christianity one of the most expansive missionary religions, particularly as the arrival of Western Christianity in the Indonesian archipelago coincided with the process of colonization, European imperialism, and white

supremacy. Valeri notes that in the 1980s, several American missionaries from the New Tribes Mission settled along the northern coast of Seram Island, near Alakamat. Their settlement in Alakamat was due to the Huaulu people's refusal to allow them to live in the mountain villages (Valeri, 2000, p. 41). However, the conflict between them and the indigenous people forced these missionaries to leave Huaulu. The Huaulu people of the 1980s still have vivid memories of them.

Muhammad Damm also recorded political efforts to instill Christian influence in Huaulu. In his research conducted in 2015, Damm noted several efforts made to "religiousize" the Huaulu people. He recounts:

> "*... pada bulan Juli 2015 beberapa orang perwakilan dari sebuah organisasi Kristen di Ambon berkunjung ke Huaulu. Mereka menemui Kamara untuk melaporkan bahwa mereka berencana mengadakan kegiatan sosial di Negeri Huaulu, yang diperuntukkan khususnya bagi anak-anak Huaulu yang menjadi siswa SD Kecil Huaulu. Pada tahun sebelumnya mereka juga pernah melakukan kegiatan serupa. Menanggapi permintaan izin mengadakan kegiatan tersebut, Kamara secara tidak langsung menolaknya karena beberapa kali telah mendapatkan laporan dari sebagian besar masyarakat Huaulu sendiri yang menyatakan bahwa mereka tidak berkenan dengan kegiatan sosial organisasi itu lantaran terkesan disertai misi-misi keagamaan*" (Damm, 2015, p. 47).
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> [In July 2015 several representatives from a Christian organization in Ambon visited Huaulu. They met Kamara to report that they were planning to organize social activities in Huaulu, specifically for Huaulu children who were students at Huaulu Primary School. In the previous year they had also conducted a similar activity. In response to the request for permission to hold these activities, Kamara indirectly rejected it because he had received several reports from most of the Huaulu people themselves stating that they were not pleased with the organization's social activities because they seemed to be accompanied by religious missions].

In addition, Damm also noted similar issue suspected to be related to structural government intervention:

> "*... adanya rencana dari Dinas Pendidikan Kabupaten Maluku Tengah untuk menugaskan empat orang guru SD mengajar di SD Kecil Huaulu. Salah satu dari keempat guru tersebut merupakan guru agama Islam. Beberapa waktu sebelumnya, pernah pula seorang guru agama Kristen mengajar di SD itu dan akhirnya mendapatkan penolakan dari*

> *masyarakat. Kamara sendiri mengungkapkan, masyarakatnya memang membutuhkan tenaga pendidik tambahan. Akan tetapi, jika yang ditugaskan adalah guru agama Islam atau pun Kristen, maka akan sia-sia mengingat anak-anak Huaulu yang menjadi siswa di SD Kecil Huaulu tak seorang pun menganut Islam atau Kristen*" (Damm, 2015, p. 48).
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> [There is a plan from the Central Maluku District Education Office to assign four elementary school teachers to teach at Huaulu Primary School. One of the four teachers is a Muslim religious teacher. Some time before, a Christian teacher had also taught at the elementary school and eventually received rejection from the community. Kamara himself revealed that his community really needs additional educators. However, if the teachers are assigned to teach Islam or Christianity, it will be useless considering that none of the Huaulu children who are students at primary school adhere to Islam or Christianity].

This reality illustrates that the existence of Christianity in Huaulu is shaped by the dynamics of interreligious relations. Christianity presents two opposing yet intertwined sides. On one hand, Christianity is represented by individuals with a pluralistic character who embody an accommodative and non-discriminatory relationship. This form of Christianity neither forces nor is forced, nor is it determinative or justificatory. The relationship with Memaham adherents is based on daily practices without attempts at conversion. On the other hand, Christianity emphasizes its exclusive soteriological aspect. This character is dominated by outsiders who view Memaham practices as heretical, dark, and unsaved, thus needing to be converted to Christianity. This form of Christianity becomes entangled in a messianic imperialism, seeing itself as a savior, while perpetuating a narrative of European supremacy that subordinates indigenous religions.

CORRELATIONAL INTERSUBJECTIVE RELATIONSHIP

In *Satu Bumi Banyak Agama*, Paul Knitter emphasizes "correlational" as an alternative approach to address the excesses caused by Christian exclusivism (Knitter, 2008, p. 41). Although he does not explicitly refer to indigenous religion, in an interview, Knitter affirmed that the correlational approach holds significant potential for incorporating indigenous religion into interreligious dialogue (Paais, 2023b). Instead of being in an exclusive paradigm, Knitter proposes a correlational approach to avoid absolutist language which is often tied to exclusive soteriological claims, and ultimately fostering global responsibility. This approach provides Christianity with a new perspective: to perceive the world as a shared home and embrace a shared responsibility

for cultivating relationships with the other. Thus, global responsibility is the way Christians contribute to address the dynamics and challenges existing on Earth without regard to religious identity.

Historically, the primary reason for the extensive encounters between Memaham adherents and Christianity was the spread of Christian missions on Seram Island. Christianity expanded its reach to mountain regions, even venturing farther than Huaulu. Consequently, the Huaulu people frequently interacted with their neighboring Christian villages. This argument does not intend to negate encounters with Islam. Encounters with Islam occurred in a different dimension, considering the spatial and dietary differences between the two.

In this relationship, Memaham adherents associate Christians as part of the Memaham community. During the research period, an elder in Huaulu asked the Author, "What is your religion?" The Author replied, "I am a Christian!" The elder immediately responded, "*Oh, ita Memaham!*" (oh, we are both Memaham). This phrase, *ita Memaham*, underscores two possibilities. First, it suggests that highland Christians were once Memaham adherents, like the Huaulu people. They shared the same geographical space: forests and mountains. Consequently, even though some neighboring villages have converted to Christianity, their former religious identity underwent hybridization with Christianity, one example being the conception of God as *Lahatala*.

Second, both Christianity and Memaham share a common dietary practice: the consumption of pork (Valeri, 1992, p. 159). As mountain dwellers, their diet primarily depends on forest resources, including pork, as well as other animals like deers, cassowaries, and cuscuses. This shared dietary pattern creates a cultural similarity between Christians and Memaham adherents, distinguishing both from Islam. Thus, diet and spatial dynamics emerge as two interrelated factors shaping the identity of both local Christian and Memaham communities. Why, then, is Islam absent from this discourse? The primary reason lies in the theological narrative that regards pork as forbidden. Additionally, some Memaham informants expressed reluctance, stating they felt compelled to hide pork when hosting Muslim guests.

Moreover, Muslim settlements are predominantly located along coastal areas (Valeri, 2000), as Muslims in these regions are often traders with an economic orientation centered on the exchange of goods and services. Consequently, the spread of Islam did not extensively reach the highlands but remained focused on coastal zones. This geographic separation resulted in less intensive

encounters between Memaham and Islam compared to Christianity.[4] Valeri observes that interactions with Islam were often marked by conflict, framing the relationship between Memaham and Islam as a tension between the mountains and the coast (Valeri, 2000, p. 23).

In recent decades, the intensity of encounters between Memaham adherents and Christians has significantly increased. While earlier interactions were shaped by distinct territorial identities, today, some residents of Huaulu identify as Christians. In fact, certain Huaulu families now include members of different religions, specifically Memaham and Christianity. Despite forming interfaith families, neither Memaham nor Christianity recognizes interfaith marriages. Both emphasize the necessity of a conversion ritual—*titinufu* for Memaham and baptism for Christianity—prior to marriage. Nevertheless, some families choose not to undergo conversion, opting instead to retain their respective religions. As a result, they cannot formalize their marriages, either through Christian or indigenous marriage (*kateha*).

In the other context, some Memaham adherents convert to Christianity, while conversely, some Christians convert to Memaham.[5] This process of conversion unfolds in a reciprocal dialectic, with both Memaham and Christianity practicing inward and outward conversion (Tylor, 1999). Individuals who undergo conversion rituals—*titinufu* or baptism—do not entirely sever their ties to their previous faith. In short, religious conversion in Huaulu fosters religious hybridity (Ruparell, 2013), multiple religious belonging, or what Raymon Panikkar (1999) refers to as *intrareligious dialogue*. Memaham adherents who convert to Christianity often remain connected to Memaham traditions, such as the prohibition against consuming dog meat (Paais, 2023c). Similarly, Christians who convert to Memaham continue to participate in certain Christian practices. Additionally, children in interfaith families occasionally engage in the rituals of both religions, a phenomenon referred to as interrituality (Moyaert & Geldhof, 2015).

The encounter between Memaham and Christianity is marked not only by harmonious relations but also by significant social dynamics, one of which is the resistance of Memaham adherents to Christian proselytization efforts. As previously mentioned, Huaulu resistance was documented by Valeri when they opposed the presence of five American missionary families from the

[4] Nonetheless, in contemporary times, Memaham adherents have experienced significant encounters with Islam, particularly due to the growing number of Muslim transmigrants who have settled in Huaulu territory, *Kilo Lima*.

[5] It is important to note that the practice of conversion into or out of Memaham, marked by the *titinufu* ritual, is exclusively applicable to women and not to men. Conversely, conversion to Christianity, signified by baptism, is applicable to both women and men.

New Tribes Mission. Similarly, Damm recorded their rejection of a Christian religious teacher appointed by the Central Maluku Regency Government to serve at Huaulu's elementary school. In another instance, the Huaulu community recalls the death of an elementary school teacher believed to have occurred because he conducted Christian worship in the school, despite the students not being Christians. These various efforts at Christianization provoked resistance from the Huaulu people against the influence of Christian propagation. This response manifested in restrictions on Christian worship within *Kampung Lama*. In essence, Christian rituals could be performed in Huaulu but were prohibited within the boundaries of *Kampung Lama*. These restrictions were not instituted formally but emerged from individual awareness, passed down through collective narratives. The community associates *Kampung Lama* as the territory of Memaham and the center of indigenous ritual practices. In contrast, Christian rituals are perceived as a threat to the authority of Memaham.

Although this resistance may seem exclusive or even anti-Christian (christianophobia), it represents the Huaulu people's strategy for resilience against the expansive Christian missionary efforts. A similar pattern can be observed among the Boti community, adherents of Halaika, who exercise great caution in engaging with Christians due to fears of forced conversion (Nenohai, 2023, p. 267). Christians are not excluded from social or structural relationships within the Huaulu community. In daily interactions, some Christians reside in or frequently move between *Kampung Lama* and *Kampung Baru*. In the village governance system, both Memaham and Christian adherents are appointed based on meritocracy, ensuring equal opportunities. As of 2024, *Kamara* (chairperson of Huaulu village) is a Muslim, the village secretary is a Christian, and several village staff members are also Christians. Similarly, in customary governance, Christians can serve as *saniri*.[6] Beyond structural inclusion, Memaham adherents also permit Christians and followers of other religions to participate in various rituals, such as *puheli*, *titinufu*, *kahua*, and others.

This phenomenon demonstrates that the resistance of Memaham adherents is not tied to religious identity but rather to intention or motive. Those who come with proselytizing intentions are inevitably rejected. This response underscores the prerogative right to determine both individual and collective religious identity (self-determination), while affirming the discourse on religious freedom as practiced by Memaham adherents. Therefore, in the context of human rights and freedom of religion of belief (FoRB), proselytizing

[6] *Saniri* is an indigenous legislative body at the village level. In Maluku, *Saniri* comprises representatives from each *soa* (clan) or *mata rumah* (lineage).

efforts are perceived as a violation and disruption of their religious freedom (Lindholm, 2010; Sharma, 2011).

This dynamic reveals a complex interreligious relationship. Unlike the interreligious dialogue often aimed at fostering harmonious relations in response to religiously motivated violence (Swidler, 2013), the reality in Huaulu demonstrates that the relationship between Christianity and Memaham is negotiative, collaborative, and even confrontational. The negotiative relationship correlates with the practice of hybrid religious identity at the individual level. This reflects how the Huaulu community negotiates their Memaham identity with Christianity. Memaham adherents who convert to Christianity do not necessarily abandon their Memaham attributions, nor vice versa, thereby creating a hybrid identity (Ruparell, 2013). Furthermore, collaborative relationships are closely intertwined with shared interests. In this context, both Christians and Memaham adherents demonstrate a strong commitment to collective interests, despite their differing religious identities (Knitter, 2008, 2013).

Conversely, the confrontational relationship represents an antithesis to exclusive Christian dominance. Exclusivist proponents often associate indigenous religions as passive recipients and their religion as the determining agent (Azumah, 2013). Therefore, when Memaham adherents demonstrate resistance to conversion attempts or prohibit Christian worship in Kampung Lama, such actions constitute an effort to assert their often-subordinated religious identity. This confrontational dynamic frequently characterizes the relationship between indigenous religions and Christianity. In some societies that are now predominantly Christian, adherents of local religions in the past actively resisted efforts to spread Christianity (Mawuntu, 2020). This fact underscores that interreligious relations are a dynamic phenomenon. Such relationships are marked not solely by harmony but also by confrontation.

The above discussion highlights the dynamic and complex nature of interreligious relations. The Huaulu people accept Christianity, yet in certain contexts, they negotiate its presence when it poses a threat to their identity. The form of Christianity that is accommodated is non-discriminatory, non-coercive, and free of conversion-driven tendencies. Conversely, the type of Christianity that is rejected is exclusive, justificatory, determinative, coercive, and oriented toward conversion.

CONCLUSION

The dominance of the world religions paradigm in interreligious discourse

tends to exclude indigenous religions. Nevertheless, the interaction between adherents of Christianity and indigenous religions has a long history, unfolding alongside the global spread of Christianity. In this context, the relationship between indigenous religions and Christianity exhibits a dynamic character. For instance, in Huaulu, the representation of Memaham as an indigenous religion holds profound significance for the community's existence and the preservation of their distinct religious-cultural identity and values. Furthermore, the advent of Christianity has introduced novel dimensions to the socio-religious landscape of the Huaulu community.

The relationship between Memaham and Christianity can be categorized into three principal aspects: negotiative, collaborative, and confrontational. The negotiative aspect indicates that Christianity is not merely excluded but rather is openly negotiated. Moreover, adherents from both traditions engage in collaboration to achieve shared interests. However, despite its acceptance as part of the collective identity, in certain particular contexts, Christianity is indeed confronted by the Memaham identity. This confrontation arises from the exclusive behaviors of individual Christians, driven by theological imperatives to convert Memaham adherents. Consequently, the resistance demonstrated by Memaham adherents constitutes a strategic and significant measure to counteract various attempts at forced conversion, whether direct or indirect. This form of resistance is not aimed at eliminating the presence of Christians within the Huaulu community; instead, it seeks to assert the equality of identity between Memaham and Christianity and to reject the dominant nature of Christianity, which often tends to act as a determinant agent. Ultimately, this study carries significant implications for the comprehensive development of interreligious relations, specifically by avoiding the romanticized bias that often prioritizes harmonious interreligious engagements.

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