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Conservation of Cultural Symbols: An Effort to Reinforce Cultural Identities to Promote Reconciliation in Ambon¹

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Abstract

The unique traditions of the Ambonese have contributed much towards the rich Indonesian cultural landscape. Unfortunately, much of this cultural symbolism was destroyed as a result of the 1999-2004 Conflict. This widespread devastation of religious and cultural objects was an attack against Ambonese group identities. This paper aims to raise awareness on the importance of the conservation of cultural objects in Ambon, as one way to promote sustainable peace in the region and draws attention to customary socio-political entities (negeri) as important actors to be considered in the discussion. Due to their recent rise in prominence in Ambonese governance, negeri are expected to be able to significantly contribute in this effort, through social engagement of its members. It is additionally argued that raising awareness should include cross-religious (Muslim/Christian) education, which will indirectly aid in the reconciliation effort by building mutual trust and recognition of each other's cultural identities. This paper identifies historical Ambonese values, ethics, morals and legal norms to establish the importance of the conservation of cultural symbols, and argues for the importance of increasing the room for social participation and the role of negeri. Data is obtained through studies of literature and documentation, interviews, and focus group discussions.

I. INTRODUCTION

The unique traditions of the Ambonese have contributed much towards the rich Indonesian cultural landscape. Unfortunately, much of this cultural symbolism was destroyed as a result of the 1999-2004 Conflict. Cultural icons lost include the more than 200-year-old Church of Hila, the church of Soya, and the residence of Soya's highly respected *Raja* (king). Not in small part, these acts of destruction were motivated by hatred and intentions to erase the culture and tradition of the enemy. In the Indonesian media, this widespread cultural violence did not garner as much attention as its seriousness would have warranted – not because the destroyed objects were insignificant, but because of a general lack of sensitivity on the importance of safeguarding culture during times of conflict.

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There is little question that this widespread devastation of religious and cultural objects was an attack against group identities. It is a strong admonition and reminder that the protection of cultural objects and symbols must be prioritized. Ambon has recovered from the devastating conflict, but rather than as a moment of relaxation, this peace should instead be seen as an opportunity to reinforce respect and protection of its many cultural objects. This is not only a responsibility of the Indonesian and local governments, but also the responsibility of the Ambonese peoples, who have the greatest stake in the matter. Such an effort should involve integrated coordination and cooperation between all levels of society.

Beyond the physical destruction of the objects, the dilution of living values represents another threat to the survival of the Ambonese culture. For the past century in particular, we notice a decline in the transmission of tradition, cultural heritage and values from generation to generation. Creeping and gradual at first, the degradation became massive after the 1999-2004 conflict. Currently, we observe that many of the younger generations have lost their involvement – and interest – in important objects and traditions that have been maintained for centuries.

This trend is contradictory with the solemn wish of many of the cultural communities in Ambon, locally referred to as *negeri*, to have their cultural status recognized by the Indonesian State. Under Indonesian law, to maintain their rights as a unit governed by *adat* (customary) law, they must be able to conserve their cultural identities. This differentiates *negeri* from other administrative units such as villages and regencies.⁵ Proving the existence of their unique identities is done by pointing to the preservation of both tangible and non-tangible cultural heritage. Detrimentially, however, *negeri* pay little attention to this important facet that could determine their survival or – alternatively – extinction, both culturally and legally.

This paper aims to raise awareness on the importance of the conservation of cultural objects and symbols in Ambon, as one way to promote sustainable peace in the region. This conservation needs to involve all individual members of the *negeri* communities, and be supported by the all levels of government. We encourage initiative from the bottom up, the promotion of awareness, and the use of the rich local culture to reach these goals.

II. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONSERVATION OF CULTURAL OBJECTS AND SYMBOLS

Certain objects and symbols have cultural significance. According to the Burra Charter, this refers to having an esthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value, for past, present or future generations. The actual significance is unique to each object or symbol: it can be embodied by the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects.⁶ For communities with a strong customary tradition, the objects take an even greater significance. For such

⁵ Peraturan Daerah Kota Ambon (Regional Regulation of Ambon City) Number 8 Year 2017, Art. 3(3).

⁶ The Burra Charter 2013, Art. 1.2.

peoples, the objects also symbolize a bond between themselves, the land, their ancestors and predecessors, and culture.⁷ The object becomes a medium through which knowledge and culture is transmitted from the past to the future.⁸

The same can be said about Ambon. The peoples of Ambon traditionally regard their cultural objects with great reverence: as sacred and emotional representations of identity and cultural perpetuity. Unfortunately, the societal and cultural impact of these objects is declining, both due to destruction or vandalism during the conflict and a general dilution of cultural values. This is a critical time for the survival of these objects' *raison d'être*, and a pressing reason to encourage conservation and cultivation, i.e., all the processes of looking after an object so as to retain its cultural significance.⁹

In times of conflict, cultural symbols become essential factors both in the propagation of violence and the quest of peace. A lack of respect for cultural symbols can exacerbate the surrounding conflict, widening divides, fueling hate, and increasing the rejection of other beliefs and cultures. Often, symbols become deliberate targets for attack in a systematic effort to strike at the enemy's identity. On the other hand, in the context of reconciliation, proper conservation of cultural objects can become a symbol for peace, rebuilding, and tolerance.¹⁰

In Ambon, cultural objects are part of a rich and ancient heritage, embodied most prominently in the existence of the many *negeri*. These are small socio-political units, bound by Ambonese *adat* law, which each have a defined territory, genealogical history, culture, and tradition. In practice they function as mini-states and are authorized both under national and *adat* law to regulate many matters autonomously. Their existence and powers are recognized by the Indonesian State.¹¹ This societal structure in itself is already a form of intangible cultural heritage unique to Ambon.

The structure of the *negeri* is stunning in its intricacy. The *negeri*'s government is comprised of a clearly outlined head of state (the *raja*) and a legislative council (the *saniri*). Furthermore, this *saniri* is comprised of several *soa* – sub-communities representing specific territorial-genealogical groups within the *negeri*, which are subsequently subdivided into representatives of *mata rumah* (clans). This system has functioned successfully for centuries to maintain the *negeri*'s cohesion, to establish a form of political checks and balances, and to accommodate the many different interests of the *negeri*'s subjects. Its success is in no small part a result of its participatory nature, wherein everyone is invited to contribute to public policy and conflict resolution.

⁷ Karolina Kuprecht, 2014, *Indigenous Peoples' Cultural Property Claims: Repatriation and Beyond*, Springer, London, pp. 40-41.

⁸ Marilena Vecco, 2010, "A definition of cultural heritage: From the tangible to the intangible", *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, Vol. 11 (2010), pp. 321-324.

⁹ The Burra Charter 2013, Art. 1.4. See also T. Marquis-Kyle & M. Walker, 1996. *The Illustrated BURRA CHARTER. Making Good Decisions About The Care Of Important Places*, Australia, ICOMOS.

¹⁰ Ann-Belinda Preis and Christina Stanca Mustea, 2013, "The Role of Culture in Peace and Reconciliation", *UNESCO High-level Discussion*, pp. 2-4.

¹¹ Peraturan Daerah Kota Ambon (Regional Regulation of Ambon City) Number 8 Year 2017, Art. 1(12).

Each *soa* has its own *batu pamali*, a sacred totem that functions as the *soa*'s unifying symbol of identity. Similarly, on a *negeri* scale, each *negeri* traditionally has its own *batu alas* ('origin stone'), a monument which represents the community's bond with their ancestors (*Tete Nene Moyang*). The *batu alas* is usually located next to the *baileo*, the sacred meeting place where important public policies are discussed and decided, and subsequently blessed by their ancestors. In addition to having strong cultural and spiritual significance, the *baileo* also represents positive moral values. Communal problems are discussed at the *baileo* together with representatives from many different societal groups, such as fishermen, farmers, youths, and women. Decisions made at the *baileo* usually are formed by consensus, taking into account the interests of all involved parties. As such, the *baileo* also becomes a symbol for democracy, equality and compassion. It becomes a sacred cultural symbol that should be protected.¹²

Cultural objects strongly contribute towards a *negeri*'s identity and sense of place. A *negeri*'s cultural objects function as a monument and a testament to its people's history, bind the people to a land, and distinguish them from members of a different *negeri*. Many important historic events or figures from the *negeri*'s past are represented and kept alive by its objects. Through the objects' survival, the *negeri*'s people can reminisce, respect and understand their past. They also serve a broader educational purpose to complement or complete historic records, to help us achieve a better understanding of past events, figures and cultures, and to help us achieve a greater respect for our environment.¹³

A prominent example of the cultural depth of these symbols is a ritual of the *negeri* of Soya called *cuci negeri*. This traditional festival is meant to share important lessons and positive values, so as to forever preserve them between generations. Until today, the ritual is carried out annually at the *negeri*'s *baileo*, led by the *negeri*'s *raja*. The name, *cuci negeri*, is literally translatable as 'cleansing the *negeri*'. During the festival's climax, the *raja* asks his subjects to cleanse their spirit from hate, scorn, distrust and conflict, and come together to develop the *negeri*. As of 20 October 2015, this ritual has been recognized by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity.¹⁴ Other important intangible symbols include cultural traditions such as *masohi*, *badati*, *maaren* and *maano*.

Conservation efforts should conform to common principles related to the preservation of cultural objects. It is very important that the original cultural integrity of the object is maintained; efforts should refrain from altering the object's traditional site, form, scale, texture and material.¹⁵ Particularly in Ambon, where land is strongly connected to cultural rights and beliefs, relocating the object is discouraged. To the contrary, the emphasis should be placed on respecting the original condition of the

¹² L. Wattimena, 2009, "Rumah Adat Baileo: Interpretasi Budaya di Negeri Hutumuri Kecamatan Leitimur Selatan Kota Ambon", *Kapata Arkeologi*.

¹³ Lalu Mulyadi, 2018, *Model Pengelolaan Bangunan Bernilai Sejarah Di Kota Malang Berbasis Konservasi Arsitektur*, Malang, Dream Litera Buana, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Available at: www.ambon.go.id/adat-cuci-negeri-soya-tradisi-yang-dijaga-hingga-kini, accessed 9 November 2019.

¹⁵ Lalu Mulyadi, op.cit. p. 8.

object as much as possible. This way, the cultural significance (the historic, moral and social value) of the object is preserved.

Four important perspectives should guide the conservation project. First, the objects as a physical manifestation of the norms accepted and applied by the group in everyday life. Second, the objects as a source or inspiration of positive values, from which the community (and even people in general) can learn. Third, preserving and mining the objects for the values they contain or represent. And forth, studying the life and phenomena of the past as represented by the objects to inspire our future decisions.¹⁶

III. INCREASING PUBLIC AWARENESS

Those closest to the objects and symbols in question should be the primary agents driving the conservation. The benefit of this approach is that the intrinsic cultural significance of the objects and symbols can be better maintained.¹⁷ In Ambon, the objects are inextricably linked with the individuals and communities to which they belong, i.e., the *negeri*. These same peoples should therefore be the first ones involved in any preservation and cultivation efforts.¹⁸ The importance of emphasizing social participation also came to the forefront during the adoption of the Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage in 2003.¹⁹

In Indonesia, both the Central Government and the local Ambonese Government can offer crucial backing to the conservation effort. There is good political momentum to push this policy: While the Soeharto Regime of 1966-1998 pushed a concerted agenda to erase or weaken local cultures and traditions, the current regime is much more supportive toward local identity and autonomy. The promulgation of Law 6 of 2014 signified the State's open support for Indonesia's many unique cultures and values. *Adat* villages such as *negeri* were awarded greater legal recognition and powers. Therefore, this is an excellent opportunity to right the damage caused by Soeharto Regime's oppressive rule.²⁰ Until now, most research on cultural objects in Indonesia was effected in the context of tourism development.²¹ More efforts should be undertaken to develop conservation as a means to support culture and identity, such as those in *negeri*.

¹⁶ Maman Rachman, *Konservasi Nilai Dan Warisan Budaya*, Indonesian Journal of Conservation Vol. 1 No. 1 - Juni 2012, pp. 30-39.

¹⁷ The Burra Charter 2013, Art. 1.4.

¹⁸ Birgit Bräuchler, 2015, *The Cultural Dimension of Peace: Decentralization and Reconciliation in Indonesia*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 101.

¹⁹ Sullivan Sharon, 2003, *Local Involvement and Traditional Practises in the World Heritage System*, working paper on "Linking Universal and Local Values, Managing a Sustainable Future for World Heritage" a conference organised by The Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO, 22-24 May 2003.

²⁰ Siti Nuraini, 2010, "Hubungan Kekuasaan Elit Pemerintahan Desa", *Jurnal Kybernan*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Maret 2010, Sakinah Nadir, 2013, "Otonomi Daerah Dan Desentralisasi Desa: Menuju Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Desa", *Jurnal Politik Profetik*, Volume 1 Nomor1 Tahun 2013

²¹ See, for example: INS SALEH, HK Hardjasoemantri, 2004, *Kajian Aspek Hukum Konservasi Cagar Budaya Terhadap Pelestarian Dan Pengembangan Pariwisata Kotagede*; O Nafila, 2013, "Peran Komunitas Kreatif dalam Pengembangan Pariwisata Budaya di Situs Megalitikum Gunung Padang," *Journal of Regional and City Planning*.

The Ambonese situation is made complicated by the religious segregation of living spaces in the city. Most negeri in Ambon developed based on clear religious lines – usually Christian or Muslim – which generates particular vulnerabilities.²² Religious segregation can threaten the conservation effort if not properly anticipated. The ‘victims’ of the 1999-2004 conflict were widespread. Thousands of cultural objects were destroyed, including 144 churches, mosques and religious sites. Many of these were sacred for the local population, and some were several centuries old.

Until now, reconciliatory responses to the conflict have had mixed successes. Most focus on economic and political rebuilding, meaning that the cultural dimension has been largely ignored. This is counterproductive for the type of peace-building which requires involvement and participation from the bottom-up. On the contrary, the bottom-up initiative should be encouraged and celebrated.²³ In contrast to the relatively ineffective efforts up till now, the cultural dimension can provide a solution because of its engagement of social and spiritual values. From society’s perspective, the local culture is known, trusted and accepted, and speaks to universal values. Unlike the divisive nature of politics and religious dogma, culture unites and represents universal humanistic values.²⁴

Raising awareness should include cross-religious (Christian/Muslim) education. This will greatly advance mutual trust and the recognition of the other’s cultural identities. This is feasible as the Christian-Muslim divide in Ambon is not new in any way. For many centuries, both groups co-existed in Ambon and had built the city together, until it blossomed into the center of commerce it is today. Christianity and Islam have become inseparable facets of Ambonese culture, distinct from the Christianity of Europe and the Islam of the Middle East. Christians and Muslims in Ambon identify themselves as *Sarane* and *Salam* – Christian-Ambonese and Muslim-Ambonese respectively. Entrenched within this label are not only religious norms from the respective religions, but also unifying norms common to all Ambonese. Through this process, traditional Ambonese culture has become almost synonymous with tolerance and multiculturalism. This culture is valuable, and most importantly, is still available to tap into today, both in the form of physical cultural objects and the living traditions currently experienced by the Ambonese.²⁵ The conservation of cultural objects and symbols is one way to ensure the tradition remains living for future generations.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

²² Jacob W. Ajawaila, 2010, “Orang Ambon dan Perubahan Kebudayaan”, *Jurnal Antropologi Indonesia*, available at: www.ijil.ui.ac.id/index.php/jai/article/viewArticle/3380, accessed 2 October 2018.

²³ Suharno, Samsuri, Iffah Nur Hayati, “Pengembangan Model Resolusi Konflik Untuk Masyarakat Multikultural (Studi Implementasi Kebijakan Resolusi Konflik di Sampit, Poso, dan Ambon)”

²⁴ Hendry Bakri, “Resolusi Konflik melalui Pendekatan Kearifan Lokal Pela Gandong di Kota Ambon: Conflict Resolution toward Local Wisdom Approach of Pela Gandong in Ambon City”, *The POLITICS: Jurnal Magister Ilmu Politik Universitas Hasanuddin*, Volume 1, Number 1, January 2015, p. 55.

²⁵ Wuri Handoko, 2019, “Salam-Sarane dan Tradisi Orang Basudara: Pelajaran dari Masa lalu tentang Relasi Islam-Kristen dan Identitas Orang Maluku”, dalam *Menelusuri Identitas Kemalukuan*, Lembaga Kebudayaan Daerah Maluku, Kanisius, Jakarta, pp. 909-910.

The reintegration of the highly divided (and segregated) peoples of Ambon is crucial for the implementation of effective reconciliatory and peace-building efforts. An approach utilizing the cultural dimension is not only feasible, but available. *Adat* law is still omnipresent in Ambon, and reinforcing the already-living values to enhance tolerance and a shared identity is an effective strategy to prevent future conflict.²⁶ Due to their recent rise in prominence in Ambonese governance, *negeri* are expected to be able to significantly contribute in this effort, through the social engagement of its members.

The cultural objects and symbols in Ambon are a resource from which important values can be extracted. These values influence Ambonese life on a daily basis, but must be nurtured and maintained. Properly conserved, they may play a major role in structuring civil society, managing natural resources, law and politics, economic activities, and security, based on established cultural norms, leading to greater stability and peace.

In the current political climate, the cultural products of Ambon receive insufficient attention and recognition. One symptom of this trend is the neglect and deterioration of cultural objects and symbols. By letting these objects degrade and vanish, we deprive ourselves of the important cultural values they contain or represent. The conservation of these objects however cannot be undertaken by only one actor. This requires acquiring support from both the Indonesian and Ambonese governments, and most importantly increasing the room for social participation and the roles of the *negeri*.

²⁶ Aholiab Watloly, Tontji Soumokil, Ishaka Lalihun, "Membangun Hubungan Harmoni Antar-komunitas Adat yang tersegregasi Paska Konflik, *in ibid.*, pp. 897-899.

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