

KAHARINGAN OR HINDU KAHARINGAN: WHAT MAKES A RELIGION “INDIGENOUS” IN CENTRAL KALIMANTAN, INDONESIAN BORNEO

Anne Schiller – George Mason University; Tiwi Etika – Hindu State Religion Institute Tampung Penyang

Abstract

In Indonesia, six official religions coexist with myriad local faiths. For some Ngaju Dayaks, an indigenous people in Central Kalimantan, the 1980 recognition of the local faith – Kaharingan – as an expression of Hinduism was part of a struggle for social justice. A volume published by Central Kalimantan’s government shortly before Kaharingan’s official consolidation with Hinduism, in fact, described the indigenous faith as “prehistoric” Hinduism (Tim Penulis 1978). While Indonesian and foreign scholars have offered descriptions of this faith and accounts of its amalgamation with Hinduism, little attention has been devoted to those who would prefer to see Kaharingan classified as a religion independent of Hinduism. This presentation explores how continued affiliation with Hinduism figures in debates concerning the legitimacy of religious organizations and what constitutes an “indigenous” religion.

Kaharingan: A Brief Introduction

Kaharingan, a minority religion in an Islamic-majority nation and a Christian-majority province, is nevertheless visible and vigorous. Up to 400,000 Ngaju claim to adhere to or at least practice some aspects of the faith. Conversions “back” to Kaharingan are also taking place. According to adherents, everything in the universe has a sensate conscious essence and is obliged to behave in accordance with *hadat*, loosely translated as rules/a proper expression of its being. The totality of human and supernatural worlds was created by the supreme being, Ranying Hatalla, and is described in the holy book Panaturan. Adherents pray to supernatural beings at weekly meetings, *basarah*, and at homes and farms. Key rituals are officiated by specialists called *basir*. The most complex rituals comprise a mortuary cycle, that culminates with souls being reunited with their ancestors and kinspeoples’ bones entombed together in ossuaries.

Consolidation/Disaffiliation

Hinduism was officially recognized in 1962 when it was demonstrated that it met criteria including belief in a high god and possessed a holy book. Before that time, devotees were relegated to the category “people who do not yet have religion.” Kaharingan religionists found themselves in a similar situation until 1980, when they were allowed to register as Hindu. Over the years modifications to earlier government policies have come into effect; the option exists for local religionists to declare themselves adherents of “streams of belief” or “ethnic religions.” Ngaju religionists can now claim adherence to an ethnic religion. Some are building upon this momentum to pursue Kaharingan’s recognition as Indonesia’s seventh official religion.

Grounds For Debate



Whether Kaharingan and Hinduism should be decoupled is a subject that provokes strong emotion. There are those who insist the basis for consolidation is well documented. Yet some maintain that government reform has enlarged their prospects. They point to the fact that Kaharingan possesses the requirements of official religion: a high god and a holy book. Two organizations involved in debates over Kaharingan’s future are the Great Council of the Hindu Kaharingan Religion (MB-AHK) and the Indonesian Kaharingan Religious Council (MAKI). MB-AHK played a fundamental role in negotiating Kaharingan’s consolidation with Hinduism. MAKI seeks the extrication of Kaharingan from Hinduism, to “protect the purity of Kaharingan teachings” and avoid “contamination by the teachings of other religions” (Zahri et al 2014). Both are headquartered in Central Kalimantan’s provincial capital, Palangka Raya.

MB-AHK and MAKI

MB-AHK’s roots lay in a defunct Kaharingan-based political party. Former members established a council to pursue religious recognition in the 1970s. That group changed its name following consolidation with Hinduism. MB-AHK has produced multiple editions of the Panaturan and expanded access to Hindu Kaharingan religious education. Organizational governance has proved problematic, however. In the early 2000s, alternative organizations promoting recognition of Kaharingan as an independent faith were founded. MAKI, launched in 2006, remains most prominent. In 2019 it filed a claim with the National Ombudsman Office that Kaharingan’s application to become a religion at the national level was being ignored. Next steps are pending.

Weekly Worship Service~Basarah



MAKI recognizes the Panaturan as its holy book. Like MB-AHK, it holds weekly worship services celebrated although in halls identified as Kaharingan rather than as Hindu Kaharingan. Convergences aside, the crux of the controversy remains whether disaffiliation would enhance local efforts to preserve Ngaju Dayak religion, identity, and values.

Concluding Note

This presentation has suggested that the official classification of Kaharingan is of vital significance to adherents and the state. It has examined a paradoxical situation whereby an indigenous religion, presently considered to be among the nation’s “oldest” indigenous faiths, suddenly has the potential to become Indonesia’s “newest” religion as well. The resolution will have important consequences for how Dayaks (and others) frame and express their religious identities.

References: Etika, T. and A. Schiller. 2022. Kaharingan or Hindu Kaharingan: What’s in a Name in Indonesian Borneo? *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 27 (forthcoming); Tim Penulis, 1978. *Sejarah Daerah Kalimantan Tengah*. Palangka Raya: Pemerintah Daerah Provinsi; Zakhri, E. et al. 2014. Kaharingan or Hinduism? *Tempo* 11 February. *Photographs by I Kade Teja Suastika; Tiwi Etika.*