

## **Strategic Syncretism: Sorcery, Magic, and Supernatural Belief in Modern Indonesia**

Kristian Tamtomo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Program Studi Sosiologi, Universitas Atma Jaya Yogyakarta

kristian.tamtomo@uajy.ac.id

---

To cite this article:

Tamtomo, Kristian. (2024). Strategic Syncretism: Sorcery, Magic, and Supernatural Belief in Modern Indonesia. *Jurnal Atma Sosiologika*, Vol. 1(1), 109-124.

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Using the conceptual framework of the politics of religious synthesis and occult economies, this paper discusses the way indigenous religious beliefs and practices in magic and sorcery continues in modern Indonesian society. The paper discusses examples obtained from a literature study or desk review, particularly of academic studies published until 2010. While these examples are dated, this paper's discussion nonetheless illustrates patterns that are of interest in the sociology and anthropology of religion in Indonesia. First, the paper argues that Indonesia's history as a palimpsest of social and religious contact sets the foundation for practices of religious synthesis. Second, various examples illustrate the way in which indigenous communities strategically use syncretism to face contemporary pressures of religious modernization. Finally, the paper discusses examples in which the enduring social, political, and economic uncertainty of post-New Order decentralized Indonesia becomes a fertile ground for the continuation of magic and sorcery as ways in which people understand and imagine resource accumulation.

Keywords: Modernization; Occult Economies; Religion; Syncretism.

### **ABSTRAK**

*Dengan menggunakan kerangka konseptual politik sintesis agama dan ekonomi okultisme, tulisan ini membahas bagaimana kepercayaan dan praktik religi masyarakat adat dalam hal sihir dan sihir terus berlanjut dalam masyarakat Indonesia modern. Makalah ini membahas contoh-contoh yang diperoleh dari studi literatur, terutama berdasarkan studi ilmiah hingga tahun 2010. Walau contoh-contoh ini berasal dari masa lalu, namun diskusi dalam makalah ini menunjukkan pola-pola yang merupakan hal yang menarik dalam kajian sosiologi dan antropologi religi di Indonesia. Pertama, makalah ini berpendapat bahwa sejarah Indonesia sebagai titik awal kontak sosial dan keagamaan menjadi landasan bagi praktik sintesis keagamaan. Kedua, berbagai contoh menggambarkan cara masyarakat adat secara strategis*

*menggunakan sinkretisme untuk menghadapi tekanan modernisasi agama. Terakhir, makalah ini membahas contoh-contoh di mana ketidakpastian sosial, politik, dan ekonomi yang bertahan pada era desentralisasi pasca-Orde Baru menjadi lahan subur bagi kelanjutan dari kepercayaan terhadap ilmu gaib sebagai cara masyarakat memahami dan membayangkan akumulasi sumber daya.*

*Kata Kunci: Ekonomi Okultisme; Modernisasi; Religi; Sinkretisme.*

---

## INTRODUCTION

This paper will focus on the continuation of practices related to magic, sorcery, and supernatural belief in contemporary Indonesian society including contexts often associated with modern spheres of living such as academia and state politics. What is interesting to note is that these practices persist despite the presence of social pressures and social movements that urge people to move away from these magical and supernatural beliefs.

One prominent pressure which this paper will discuss comes from the Indonesian government's policy in spreading development. The national development project often sought to emphasize rationality in various aspects of life in order to achieve a modern developing nation state, urging local populations to do away with traditional rituals and practices that are associated with beliefs in magic and spirits. In the realm of religion, part of this modernization included the Indonesian government's push for the adoption of world religions since local beliefs were officially designated as mere customs (*adat*) and not as religions.

Another prominent social movement against practices in magic and supernatural belief emerged from reform or modernization movements within established world religions in Indonesia, particularly Islam and Christianity. These 'religious modernization' movements often emphasize a literal interpretation of sacred texts and push for the purification orthodox religious practice by removing elements that are considered syncretic or contain elements that are considered magical or superstitious.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The paper will argue that the continual practice of magic and supernatural beliefs in contemporary Indonesian society can be explained by to conceptual perspectives in the anthropological study of religion. First, following Allerton (2009) as well as Shaw and Stewart (1994), the continuation of these beliefs and practices reflect the politics of religious

synthesis, in which local magical beliefs and practices are often synthesized into the framework of world religions. As the paper will show Indonesia has had a long history of religious contact, even before the arrival of European colonialism, in which religious syncretism has occurred due to socio-political reasons.

Second, following Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), the paper will argue that in contemporary contexts the practice of magic and supernatural belief, particularly in situations normally associated with modernity and rationality, is part of the way Indonesians try to access lucrative social positions or networks in the context of rapid socio-political change as well as the uneven effects of development.

The analysis presented in this paper, using the two aforementioned perspectives, is in no way an exhaustive or definitive analysis regarding the continuation of practices of magic, sorcery and supernatural beliefs in contemporary Indonesia. However, I believe that the conceptual perspectives used in the analytical framework of this paper does present one viable interpretation, among many possible ones, to understand practices of magic, sorcery, supernatural beliefs, and indigenous religions in the context of present-day Indonesia. In this case, an interpretation that is couched in both the history of religious contact as well as the present day social, economic, and political conditions surrounding various forms of religious practices.

## **METHODS**

The examples and conceptual discussions that this paper presents are drawn entirely from a literature study of mainly anthropological works on religion in Indonesia, mainly from the 20th century and early 21st century. I obtained most of the written sources through the excellent library facilities at the University at Albany as well as from online mass media. While the sources discussed in this paper are mostly dated before 2010, I nonetheless argue that the ideas I present illustrates patterns that are still of interest in the sociology and anthropology of religion in Indonesia.

## **FINDING & DISCUSSION**

### **Historical & Social Context of Religious Belief in Indonesia**

This section will discuss both the historical context of religious contact between local beliefs and world religions as well as the social context for religion in post-independence Indonesian society. The historical discussion is important to give a background of how the

politics of religious synthesis between world religions and local beliefs and practices have been going on throughout the history of the Indonesian archipelago. The description of the post-independence religious policy helps to illustrate the contemporary social situation around practices of magic and supernatural beliefs.

### *Indonesia as a religious palimpsest*

The Indonesian archipelago is a historical palimpsest of religious contact, involving (officially) four major trans-national religions: Buddhism, Hindu, Islam, and Christianity. These world religions arrived in the archipelago at different historical periods. In the process of their establishment, these world religions often underwent processes of synthesis with already present local beliefs, processes which this paper will show as being motivated by social and political factors and not merely a result of mixing or dilution of beliefs.

The religious landscape of Indonesia has not always been dominated by world religions. Local beliefs in sorcery, magic and guardian spirits were already present in the hundreds of ethno-linguistic groups that populate the archipelago. However, in contemporary Indonesia, many of the ritual practices and beliefs of these 'local ethnic religions' are often already social product of the interaction of world religions and village rituals and beliefs (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:3). In order to tease out the historical layers of religious contact that lie behind contemporary practices, the paper will now present a brief discussion of how world religions have entered and established themselves in the Indonesian archipelago.

The first world religions to enter the archipelago were Buddhism and Hindu, mainly brought by traders from India but then also spread by monks (Sneddon, 2003:35). The earliest evidence of this influence was in the Kutai region in Borneo, where archeologists discovered stone pillars bearing Sanskrit inscription dated to around the 4th century (Sneddon, 2003:34). By the 7th century A.D. these religions had established themselves in the western parts of the archipelago, with the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya in the island of Sumatra and the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of the Syailendra and Sanjaya dynasties in Java. Remnants of these early Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in Java can be seen in the form of stone temples (candi) still present in central Java.

The height of Hindu influence peaked with the Majapahit empire centered in East Java. Starting from around the early 12th century, the empire peaked in the mid-1300s when it commanded authority over "vassal states throughout Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, Borneo and Eastern Indonesia" (Ricklefs, 2001:22). The influence of this Hindu kingdom in Java can still be seen in present day traditional cultural performances such as the Javanese shadow

plays which portray the Hindu epics of Mahabarata and Ramayana as well as some forms of religious rituals and practices, as the paper will discuss later. The expanse of territory that Majapahit controlled is also often viewed by contemporary Indonesians as a precedent to the current political boundaries of the Indonesian Republic (Ricklefs, 2001:22).

The Hindu influence of Majapahit began to decline in the late 14th and early 15th century. By that time, Islamic kingdoms had started to emerge in the western parts of the archipelago, especially with the rise of the Malacca Sultanate in the Malacca Peninsula, as well as the emergence of Muslim kings in Sumatra and the northern coast of Java. By the 16th century, the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Majapahit had virtually dispersed, overtaken by the Sultanate of Demak from the north coast of Java, and said to have escaped to the island of Bali which is now a center of Hindu in Indonesia.

At this time, new Islamic states were forming in various regions of the archipelago. In Sumatra, the Acehese Sultanate emerged as a power in the early 1500s, expanding their territory from the northern tip of Sumatra southwards (Ricklefs, 2001:37). In the vicinity, the Sultanate of Johor in the Malay Peninsula was also an established power. In Java, the emerging power of the Sultanate of Demak on the north coast of Java expanded to other parts of the island, setting up other Sultanates such as Banten and Cirebon in west Java and Mataram in central Java. After the decline of the coastal Sultanate of Demak, the Sultanate of Mataram would later become the main political center of central and eastern Java up to the 19th century (Ricklefs, 2001:46). Islam had also spread to eastern Indonesia, mainly the 'Spice Islands' of the Moluccas which attracted the trading activities of Muslim Javanese and Malay merchants. The influence of these traders helped to establish the Muslim kingdoms of Ternate and Tidore in the Moluccas by the 16th century (Ricklefs, 2001:10). Thus, by this time, Islam had established itself in areas of the archipelago that were important for international trade: the Sumatran shores adjacent to the Strait of Malacca, the Malay Peninsula, the northern coast of Java, and the islands of the Moluccas.

Soon, however, another layer would be added to this palimpsest of religious contact. In 1511, the Portuguese successfully took control of the Malacca Strait and soon were setting their sights on the lucrative spice islands of the Moluccas (Ricklefs, 2001:27). After being able to build trading relations with Ternate and Tidore, the Portuguese were then able to establish Christian missions in the island of Ambon, which became the center for Portuguese activities in the area, resulting in the establishment of an indigenous Christian population on the island and region. The establishment of Christianity as another layer in Indonesia's

historical religious palimpsest was to be continued on by the Dutch who succeeded the Portuguese in the 17th century as the main European actor in the archipelago. While the Dutch initially attempted to monopolize trade in the archipelago through the formation of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), soon they were also actively trying to convert the local population to Christianity. This continued when the control of the archipelago shifted to the Dutch colonial government after the bankruptcy of the VOC at the end of the 18th century. Christian missionaries from Europe also came in to spread Christianity in various regions of the archipelago though they achieved most of their success with ethnic groups that were not under the influence of Islam, such as the highland Bataks in Sumatra (Steedly, 1996), the Sumbanese (Hoskins, 1987; Keane, 2007) and the people of Flores (Allerton, 2009) in the East Nusa Tenggara islands, various populations in the interior of Sulawesi (Volkman, 1987 on the Toraja; Aragon, 1991 on the Tobaku highlanders) and North Sulawesi, and Papuans in the island of Papua (Rutherford, 2005). Nevertheless, the missionary work during Dutch colonialism was also able to establish Christian communities in the Muslim dominated areas of Java and coastal Sumatra.

#### *Post-independence religious modernization*

After Indonesia gained its independence from the Netherland the political situation regarding religion in Indonesia, both towards world religions as well as indigenous religions, changed as the Indonesian government enacted policies in the sphere of religious life. The Indonesian government's position on religion after independence was to enact a compromise between Muslim political parties that wanted to establish an Islamic state and nationalist parties that were opposed to this idea. The compromise entailed making Indonesia a religious nation without making any faith the religion of the state (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:17). According to the state ideology of Pancasila, the first tenet of the Indonesian nation state was a belief in One God (*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*), which implied that the state believed in a monotheistic God yet without spelling it out in the terms of a specific religion. While this compromise aimed to be a model of religious inclusiveness, its application tended to exclude some forms of religious beliefs since the state's conception of religion (*agama*), which is based on the state ideology of belief in a single God, covers only monotheistic world religions that usually possess written scripture (Atkinson, 1987:177). In the context of post-colonial Indonesia, this usually refers to the five faiths recognized by the state: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hindu, and Buddhism (Schiller, 1996:410). Religious affairs in the nation state

became overseen by the Ministry of Religion, whose policy is to absorb people who still maintain indigenous beliefs into one of these officially recognized religions (Schiller, 1996:410). This policy, while not necessarily coercively employed, is often conveyed in formal education which portrays membership in official religions as signaling progress, modernization, and good citizenship (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:23). Adherence to official religions implied literacy, organized institutions, and cosmopolitan social relations with a wider world, all of which are desirable characteristics from the perspective of the state's modernist development project. People who have not adopted these official religions are often regarded as backward and often labeled as 'people who do not yet have religion' (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:21). This status of 'not yet having a religion' was socially disadvantageous in the aftermath of the so-called failed Communist coup of 1965, where the state sponsored purge of the Communist Party and their sympathizers meant that allegiance to official religions became seen as the best way to distance oneself from the stigma of being associated with Communism (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:19).

If the notion of religion is officially defined as adherence to official religions, then indigenous religious practices and beliefs tend to be regarded as merely being customs (*adat*) or beliefs (*kepercayaan*). Thus, the Indonesian state and society did not formally afford them the same social standing as religions (*agama*). Since the state favors that people adopt official religions, it also expects indigenous populations to inevitably give up their indigenous beliefs and practices. This separation between religion (*agama*) and customs (*adat*) or beliefs (*kepercayaan*) together with the state policy on defining religion based on monotheistic religious faiths creates an environment that tends to disfavor the continuation of indigenous religious practices in favor of the adoption of official religions.

In addition to state policies, another factor going against the continuation of indigenous religious practices has been coming from within the official religions themselves. While these religions have historically co-existed and even absorbed indigenous religious rituals and beliefs, movements emphasizing religious orthodoxy, the literal interpretation of scripture as well as the purging of practices and beliefs deemed either magical or traditional have emerged particularly within Islam and Christianity. With Christianity, especially Protestantism, the emphasis on orthodoxy was often present from the early days of missionary work (Keane, 2007), though this has not always led to the abandonment of indigenous elements in religious practices. With Islam, the religious reform movement emerged in the post-colonial era in which orthodox Muslim movements sought to challenge and reform the syncretic traditional

Islam that was already established. A classic example of this is Geertz's (1957) case of a disagreement between these two groups in the context of a funeral ceremony in post-independence Indonesia. Geertz documented the emergence of Islamic modernism, mainly among the traders in urban areas, which emphasized beliefs and practices more explicitly on universal and international doctrines of Islam (1957:37). In contrast, the triumph of the nationalist movement during the independence years has meant that the strengthening of the syncretic or traditional Islam particularly among the proletariat/peasant class of Javanese society. The widening contrast between these two groups, the Islamic modernist *santri* and the syncretic traditionalist Muslim *abangan*, exacerbated by the political orientation and socio-economic difference between these two groups, was the background of the disagreement regarding how to perform the funeral ceremony. At the death of an *abangan* man, the *santri* Muslim officials who were asked to conduct the prayers refused to do so, citing that the man's family was affiliated to a political party that was ideologically against the Muslim modernist movement (Geertz, 1957:41). The resulting crisis that emerged during the ritual shows the social tension between religious modernists and syncretic traditionalists in defining religious practices within an official religion.

This social pressure toward more orthodox practices and beliefs becomes another force against the continuation of indigenous or syncretic religious practices that involve sorcery, magic and belief in local spirits. However, as the paper will show, practices related to sorcery and magic still continue to be practiced by those that have adopted official religions and even in contexts that are associated with modern and rational life.

### Strategic Syncretism and the Politics of Religious Synthesis

One way this paper will seek to understand the practice of magic, sorcery and supernatural beliefs in contemporary Indonesian contexts is by viewing these practices as products of strategic syncretism. The perspective on syncretism that I will take here follows Shaw and Stewart (1994), who have defined syncretism in the sense of the politics of religious synthesis. This definition contrasts with previous understandings of syncretism that often viewed it as merely being a mixture of beliefs in contrast to the purity of tradition (Shaw and Stewart, 1994:1). By recasting syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis, the focus shifts towards the process of religious synthesis as well as the structures of power and agency involved in them (Shaw and Stewart, 1994:6). Hence, the process of syncretism becomes connected to other processes of social contact such as indigenization and multiculturalism,



which often involve various socio-political processes, as well as processes that are the exact opposite such as religious purification or anti-syncretism in which groups seek to maintain cultural or religious boundaries.

In discussing the politics of religious synthesis in Indonesia, the paper will focus on syncretism in the context of religious and cultural contact, the context of facing the state policy on religion, and in the context of religious modernization/reform movements. These different contexts are what this paper has already mentioned as the social setting in which practices of magic, sorcery and supernatural beliefs continue to be practiced.

The discussion of syncretism in the context of religious and cultural contact is important here because it demonstrates that the politics of religious synthesis has been happening throughout the history of religious and cultural contact in Indonesia. World religions have been interacting with elements of local religious beliefs ever since they arrived in the archipelago and have often resulted in local forms of religious rituals that are a product of the interaction of world religions and indigenous elements. The politics of religious synthesis plays a part in these religious interactions as they are often the result of political negotiation between the social groups involved. For example, back in the 7th century, the introduction of Hindu in Sumatra was successful among the elite of the Srivijaya kingdom as this elite class drew upon a foreign theocratic ideology to legitimize their political position. The religious social hierarchy of Hinduism provided both a 'projection and legitimation of monarchical order' (Kipp and Rodgers, 1987:15). Similarly, in south Sulawesi, Pelras (1985) described how the introduction of Islam in the 17th century did not straight away involve the abandonment of indigenous religious practices and beliefs. The main aim to be achieved first was conversion and the early Muslim clerics hoped that long term religious teaching would then displace these indigenous elements. In return, the offices of religious leadership were handed over to the south Sulawesi nobility.

In Java, the politics of religious synthesis has produced rituals that combine elements of local belief in guardian spirits, the influence of Hindu as well as the use Muslim prayers, such as Beatty's (1996) description of the *slametan* ritual, usually enacted either on important life cycle stages or at other socially significant event in both personal and communal life. In the ritual, while the prayers are Muslim and conducted in Arabic, the symbolisms of the food and flower offerings often reflect elements of local guardian spirits as well as Hindu beliefs (Beatty 1996). *Slametan* in other regions of Java even lack overt Islamic reference, involving different dedications to local spirits, yet maintaining the same symbolic food offerings.

A different historical experience of religious contact can lead to a different combination of indigenous and official religion. Allerton's (2009) study of religion and animism in Flores shows how the indigenous tolerant mission of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) led to the local population being able to separate the religious realms of indigenous ritual practices with that of Catholic liturgy. For the people in Manggarai, West Flores, the indigenous ceremony of the water ritual was the only way for them to communicate with the spirits that resided in the land. At the same time, these people were also practicing Catholics who believe that Catholicism does have power over their indigenous spirit world though not in the same communicative way as their water ritual. Nevertheless, the indigenous "agricultural animism" has not remained the same throughout history since it has also adjusted itself to the introduction of Catholicism and the Indonesian state's program of national development.

With regards to state policy, the politics of religious synthesis also occurs to enable indigenous religious beliefs and practices to continue and even achieve parity with official religions. Schiller's (1996) study of the Dayak Ngaju of Borneo showed the politics of religious synthesis in regards on how the ethnic group adopted elements of official religions, such as an organized hierarchy, written scripture, and standardized rituals to their indigenous religion of Kaharingan. The Dayak Ngaju instituted weekly prayer meetings called *basarah* which eclectically drew its inspiration from world religions such as Islam and Christianity which have weekly rituals. The *basarah* ritual includes sermons from the Kaharingan lesson book (*Buku Panaturan*) which seems to be modeled after the Bible (Schiller, 1996:414). The Kaharingan also had a creed called the Five Pillars of Faith inspired by the Islamic creed as well as emphasizing that the religion worshiped a supreme deity, the Ranyang Hatalla Langit, the Creator in Kaharingan cosmology (Schiller, 1996:414). All these enabled the Ngaju Dayak to claim to the Ministry of Religion that the indigenous Kaharingan religion was on par with the other official religions, as well as making it function as an emblem of their ethnic identity.

In facing religious modernization movements of official religions, the politics of religious synthesis leads some ethnic groups to strategically syncretize their magical practices with elements of official religions in order to ensure their continuation. For example, Kang (2006) documents how the Petalangan people of Sumatra adopt Islamic terms in their public *belian* ritual songs to portray a Muslim identity to both the state and other ethnic groups (Kang, 2006:12). The ritual songs themselves are also now regarded from a referential perspective on language which emphasizes meaning, rendering these ritual songs as

entertainment or examples of traditional culture (Kang, 2006:10) and shifting away from the original performative function of the ritual songs as part of healing rituals. In contrast, the Petalangan also adopt Islamic phrases for their private magic spells, usually for personal needs, however they use these phrases from a performative language perspective, using the phrases to make spells more powerful by drawing on their spiritual power. As Kang (2006:14-15) explains, the Petalangan insert Islamic phrases in the public ritual songs to present them as Islamicized representation of local tradition. At the same time, the Petalangan use Islamic phrases in their private spells in the hope of transmitting the power of God on to the spell caster from a performative perspective on language.

Aragon (1991) presents a Protestant example with the Tobaku of Central Sulawesi. Here, the successful missionary work of the Salvation Army has instilled Protestantism as the main religion as well as remove many indigenous pre-Christian rituals. In its place, the Tobaku now enact family prayer feasts called ‘utterance of thanks’ which are mainly made up of Christian hymns, Biblical readings and prayers. What is interesting here is that despite the thoroughly Christian format of the ritual, they are usually held at various traditional life-cycle and agricultural events and even in response to events of crisis or bad luck. The rituals are then, not simply motivated by the need to thank the Christian God but also by the traditional moral logic of how atonement is made to a deity for cases related to community transgressions (Aragon, 1991:376). Thus, according to Aragon (1991:377), while the Tobaku have rejected most of their pre-Christian cosmology and have adopted thoroughly Christian rituals, the moral logic motivating these rituals is still drawn from a pre-Christian rationale.

These examples show how practices related to magic and traditional beliefs can still continue in the contemporary Indonesian context in which state policy favors official religions, when most of the population have adopted official religions, and there are religious modernization movements. Through the process of strategic syncretism, the politics of religious synthesis ensures that indigenous beliefs or religions are still a relevant fixture of contemporary Indonesian social life.

### [Magic and Sorcery in Indonesian Modernization and Development](#)

The second way in which this paper seeks to understand the continuation of magic, sorcery and supernatural belief in contemporary Indonesian social life is by following Comaroff and Comaroff’s (1999) analysis that “occult economies” are increasingly becoming an integral part of millennial capitalism. In the Comaroffs’ analysis, this is because post-

colonial populations are often left out of the mechanisms of the global market yet are exposed to or are exploited by these mechanisms. In the contexts of this uncertainty, particularly in post-colonial developing economies, crime and magic become viable modes of production open to those who lack other resources (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999:289).

As Indonesians still experience uneven effects of economic development, practices of magic and sorcery often emerge as part of the way people ensure success even in realms associated with rationality and modernity. Wessing (1996) provides an excellent example in his analysis of accusations of sorcery among academics in an Indonesian university in East Java. The social context of academic life in Indonesia shows the competition to gain lucrative social positions either within the campus administration or in certain research centers. The access to these social positions often requires good social connections or the patronage of senior members of the faculty. Since magic and sorcery are commonly known in East Java as a tactic to obtain wealth, success in gaining or maintaining lucrative social positions often produce rumors of sorcery or at least the use of magical aids (Wessing, 1996). Nonetheless, to ensure the fickle means of social connections or to influence others as well as protect one's social position from rivals, some academics do turn to sorcery and certain forms of personal magic. What is interesting in Wessing's study is that these Javanese academics can choose to either go to orthodox Muslim clerics (*kiai*) or traditional *dukuns* (healers, magicians), depending on their religious orientation, to get protective magic in the form of charms and prayers (1996:275). These two figures are considered as having the ability to access and influence supernatural "power", though using different means: the first through religious practice and piety, the latter through ascetic practices and magical rituals. When admitting to procuring magic from these figures, Wessing's informants mostly mentioned that they do so to obtain personal magic such as *pengasih* charms or spells, which enhances their personalities to improve their social interactions, or to obtain protective magic to protect their positions and to ensure safe passage on any undertakings (1996:275). Rumors of sorcery mainly emerged from others in academia, especially when physical harm, either due to health or accidents, befall those who are considered competitors to a social position. Thus, in the uncertain economic context of Indonesian academia with its limited resources, magic and sorcery continue to play a role in the social imagination and community understanding of how lucrative social positions are gained and maintained.

The importance of social connection and patron-client relationships in academia also extend to other forms of public positions in Indonesia, most importantly in formal state

politics at various levels. This strong association with social connections and patron-client relationships leads to the general public opinion that public employees, both civil and military, tend to be corrupt since the public views that success in these fields implies kickbacks and acts of collusion (Wessing, 1996:263), not to mention the ever-lurking rumors of magic and sorcery.

Bubandt (2006), in his study of local politics in North Moluccas, suggests that perceptions on the incidence of political sorcery often go hand in hand with perceptions of political corruption. In the post-Suharto years, where rapid transformation in local politics occurred through the state's decentralization policy which transformed the country from "one of the most centralized systems in the world" to a decentralized system based on local autonomy (Bubandt, 2006:413), the perception that there is increasing political sorcery coupled with the perception of political corruption often bellies the public pessimism on the condition of local politics. The perception of sorcery and magic in politics itself is widespread in Indonesia with top national politicians, such as the late Suharto and other presidents such as Megawati Sukarnoputri and Abdurrahman Wahid (who himself was believed to have mystical powers, due to his position as a high ranking Muslim cleric), are all rumored have had the aid of dukuns and various magical protection, something which the Western print media has also picked up.

"There is regular talk that Mr. Suharto still consults various dukun and tries to increase his power using enchantments. Yet many of the Javanese who tend to believe in such things say Mr. Suharto's great wahyu has declined sharply since his wife died in 1996" (Kristoff (1998), *The New York Times*).

In the case of local politics in North Moluccas, the rapid political transformation brought by the decentralization policy in local governance led to the opening of local politics and economy to new sources of administrative income (venture capitalism in the form of mining concessions) that were previously the purview of the centralized Indonesian state (Bubandt, 2006:418). The resulting political competition for these new resources is often conducted through the continuation of how politics was conducted during the centralized New Order government, mainly centering on the morality and political regulation of kickbacks and patron-client relationships (Bubandt, 2006:419). However, this 'crony capitalism' or crony politics is now couched within the discourse of regional autonomy and democracy. The resulting political competition is also crosscut by the "occult logic that derives its legitimacy as much from the global millennial discourse of democracy (as described in Comaroff and

Comaroff 1999) as it does from a local moral logic of sociality and sorcery” (Bubandt, 2006:428). Hence, while the public discourse on corruption and political sorcery often expresses a negative view of these activities, reflecting the social dissatisfaction with the ‘politics as usual’ situation of decentralized local administration, the informal discourse reflects the renewal of the social imagination on corruption and sorcery (based on the way rumors of corruption and sorcery are still circulated) that recognizes them as aspects of modern Indonesian political life (Bubandt, 2006:428).

## CONCLUSION

The two perspectives described in this paper, (i) syncretism as the politics of religious synthesis (Shaw and Stewart, 1994), and (ii) magic and sorcery as occult economies in modern capitalist contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999), help illustrate how practices of magic, sorcery and supernatural beliefs rooted in indigenous traditions can still continue in the context of contemporary Indonesia. These practices and beliefs can continue despite their practitioners’ conversion into state sanctioned religions due to the politics of religious synthesis produced through specific histories of religious contact. This process of strategic syncretism enabled the continuation of magic and supernatural practices, or at least its logic (see Aragon’s, 1991 example above), while maintaining allegiance to state sanctioned religions through the appropriation of elements of these official religions in indigenous rituals. Even groups that adhere to a non-state sanctioned indigenous religion can strategically syncretize elements and practices of other religions in order to portray a standardized, socially organized, script-based religion that is on par with state sanctioned religions.

At the same time, practices of magic and sorcery are often still a part of people’s social imagination in Indonesia, despite the public/official discourse labeling these practices as backwards. Thus, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) have argued, occult economies that employ magic and sorcery are still relevant in the social imagination of as a way people seek to understand how others can ensure and maintain access to scarce lucrative social positions. As Bubandt has shown, in the rapid change to political decentralization and Indonesia’s further integration into the global economy, corruption and sorcery “have come to be seen as similar rather than opposed political tools” (2006:419), albeit tools that are employed secretly and away from public view. Furthermore, if the Indonesian state’s definition of itself as a modern state includes the emphasis of being religious (albeit in a general monotheistic sense), then Wessing’s (1996) example of people being able to choose either Muslim clerics or

traditional dukuns as ‘providers’ of magical aid suggests that perhaps, at least in these cases of occult economies, the functional difference between religion and magical practices are somewhat blurry. Thus, while practices of magic and sorcery may not be acceptable in the public discourse of public life, they nevertheless remain a part of the popular social imagination in understanding the way in which economic resources and political power are achieved and maintained in contemporary Indonesia.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally the final assignment in a graduate-level seminar course on the anthropology of religion at the University at Albany, State University of New York in 2011. I thank Professor Louise Burkhart for her inspiring guidance during the course and the class discussions that led to the drafting of this paper.

## REFERENCES

- Aragon, L. V. (1991). “Revised Rituals in Central Sulawesi: The Maintenance of Traditional Cosmological Concepts in the Face of Allegiance to World Religion.” *Anthropological Forum* 6 (3): 371-384.
- Allerton, C. (2009). “Static Crosses and Working Spirits: Anti-Syncretism and Agricultural Animism in Catholic West Flores.” *Anthropological Forum* 19 (3): 271-287.
- Atkinson, J. (1987). “Religions in Dialogue: The Construction of an Indonesian Minority Religion” In Kipp, R. S. and Rodgers, S. (eds.), *Indonesian Religions in Transition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Beatty, A. (1996). “Adam and Eve and Vishnu: Syncretism in the Javanese Slametan”. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2 (2): 271-288.
- Bubandt, N. (2006). “Sorcery, Corruption, and the Dangers of Democracy in Indonesia.” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12 (2): 413-431.
- Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J. (1999). “Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony.” *American Ethnologist* 26 (2):279-303.
- Geertz, C. (1957). “Ritual and Social Change: A Javanese Example.” *American Anthropologist* 59 (1):32-54.
- Hoskins, J. (1987). “Entering the Bitter House: Spirit Worship and Conversion in West Sumba.” In Kipp, R. S. and Rodgers, S. (eds.), *Indonesian Religions in Transition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

- Kang, Y. (2006). "'Staged' Rituals and 'Veiled' Spells: Multiple Language Ideologies and Transformations in Petalangan Verbal Magic". *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 16 (1): 1-22.
- Keane, W. (2007). *Christian moderns: Freedom and fetish in the mission encounter*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kipp, R. S. and Rodgers, S. (1987). "Introduction: Indonesian Religions in Society." In Kipp, R. S. and Rodgers, S. (eds.), *Indonesian Religions in Transition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Kristoff, N. (1998). "Suharto, a King of Java Past, Confronts Indonesia's Future." *The New York Times*, May 17. Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/17/world/suharto-a-king-of-java-past-confronts-indonesia-s-future.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>. Accessed 5/8/2011.
- Pelras, C. (1985). "Religion, Tradition, and the Dynamics of Islamization in South Sulawesi." *Archipel* 29: 107-135.
- Ricklefs, M.C. (2001). *A History of Modern Indonesia since c.1200, Third edition*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Rutherford, D. (2005). "Frontiers of Lingua Franca: Ideologies of the Linguistic Contact Zone in Dutch New Guinea." *Ethnos* 70 (3):387-412.
- Steadly, M. (1996). "The Importance of Proper Names: Language and "National" Identity in Colonial Karoland." *American Ethnologist* 23 (3):447-475.
- Schiller, A. (1996). "An "Old" Religion in "New Order" Indonesia: Notes on Ethnicity and Religious Affiliation". *Sociology of Religion* 57 (4): 409-417.
- Shaw, R. and Stewart, C. (1994). "Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism." In Stewart, C. and Shaw, R. (eds.), *Syncretism/anti-syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*. London: Routledge.
- Sneddon, J. (2003). *The Indonesian Language: Its History and Role in Modern Society*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- Volkman, T.A. (1987) "Mortuary Tourism in Tana Toraja." In Kipp, R. S. and Rodgers, S. (eds.), *Indonesian Religions in Transition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Wessing, R. (1996). "Rumors of Sorcery at an Indonesian University." *Journal of South East Asian Studies* 27 (2): 261-279.