

PRESERVATION AS RECONCILIATION: THE VALUE OF RAISING AWARENESS ON CULTURAL PROPERTY IN POST-CONFLICT AMBON

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Abstract

A significant portion of cultural symbols in Ambon, Indonesia were destroyed during the 1999-2004 religious conflict. This widespread devastation of religious and cultural objects was an attack against Ambonese group identities, the ramifications of which persist today, complicating reconciliatory efforts. 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. Data was obtained through studies of literature and documentation, interviews, and focus group discussions. It was found that 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. Raising awareness should include cross-religious (Muslim/Christian) education, which will indirectly aid in the reconciliation effort by building mutual trust and recognition between cultural identities.

Keywords: *Conservations; Cultural-symbols; Ambon; Reconciliation*

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 religious conflict. Thousands of cultural objects were reportedly destroyed during the conflict, including 144 churches, mosques and religious sites [1,2]. Cultural icons lost include the more than 200-year-old church of Hila [3], the church of Soya, and the residence of Soya's highly respected *Raja* (king) [4]. 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.

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 [5]. Ambon has recovered from the

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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, a decline in the transmission of tradition, cultural heritage and values from generation to generation should be noticed. Creeping and gradual at first, the degradation became massive after the 1999-2004 religious conflict. Currently, it is observed 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 [6,7]. 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 [7]. 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 [8].

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

Experimental

Materials

This study was conducted on both physical and intangible cultural symbols in Ambon, and their significance for local culture, tradition, values, and conflict resolution processes. Data was obtained through historical accounts of the *negeri* in Ambon and their societal structures and cultures, customary laws, and the cultural symbols recognised by each *negeri*.

Data was collected from all 22 *negeri* in Ambon, namely the *negeri* of: Laha, Tawiri, Hative Besar, Rumahtiga, Passo, Halong, Batu Merah, Soya, Hative Kecil, Hutumuri, Hatalai, Ema, Leahari, Rutong, Naku, Hukurila, Kilang, Urimessing, Nusaniwe, Amahuau, Latuhalat, and Seilale.

Methods

Data was obtained through a comprehensive literature study on the subject and in-depth interviews with both leading experts in the field of culture and tradition in Ambon, as well as representatives from the many *negeri*.

The literature study departed from historical accounts of the *negeri* and their cultural symbols from the nineteenth century onward. Because Ambon has a very strong oral tradition, the authors initially experienced difficulties in finding sufficient material for a comprehensive analysis. The literature study was therefore necessarily complemented through direct interviews with many important figures. Source selection was done through snowball sampling. A sufficiently large pool of sources was eventually attained enabling the authors to crosscheck claims made by other sources and to avoid biases in the data. The interview process was concluded when new referred sources no longer provided variations to collected information.

The results from the literature study and interviews were presented during a focus group discussion (FGD). Participants were selected from a variety of groups involved in the reconciliation process in Ambon. They included representatives from the *negeri* (including the *raja* and customary elders) and local Ambonese government, academics and experts in the field, activists, and NGOs. The results of the FGD were analysed qualitatively, leading to a holistic understanding of the relevance of cultural object preservation for the reconciliation process.

Results and discussion

Certain objects and symbols have cultural significance. According to the Burra Charter [9], 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. According to Kuprecht [10], the objects take an even greater significance for communities with a strong customary tradition. For such peoples, the objects also symbolize a bond between themselves, the land, their ancestors and predecessors, and culture. The object becomes a medium through which knowledge and culture is transmitted from the past to the future [11].

In times of conflict, cultural symbols become essential factors both in the propagation of violence and the quest of peace [12]. 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 preservation of cultural objects can become a symbol for peace, rebuilding, and tolerance.

Study results suggest that the cultural landscape in Ambon is equipped with a wide range of cultural objects and symbols that prove vital for both the continued existence of the societal structure and for conflict-prevention. Below, the cultural symbols and the significance of their preservation are presented, followed by the authors' suggestions on how these can be maintained in the current political, social and cultural climate.

Significance of the Conservation of Cultural Objects and Symbols

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 preservation and cultivation, i.e., all the processes of looking after an object so as to retain its cultural significance [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 [13]. 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. 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 [13]. The *negeri's* government is comprised of a clearly outlined head of state (the *raja*) and a customary institution (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 [14]. 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 [15].

There are many different cultural objects in Ambon. Each *soa* has its own *batu teong*, 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*) [16]. 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 (Figs. 1-5).



Fig. 1. *Batu pamali* in Latuhalat functioning as a monument of an event in the *negeri*'s history.



Fig. 2. *Batu teong* of the Luhu clans in Hatalai.



Fig. 3. *Baileo* of Laha



Fig. 4. *Baileo* of Hutumuri

In addition to having strong cultural and spiritual significance, the *baileo* also represents positive moral values. Communal problems are discussed at the *baileo* by *raja*, *saniri*, 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. The

designs of the floor, columns and symbols in a *baileo* reflect certain values. The lack of partitions is meant to communicate that all community members are invited to voice their positions and contribute toward the discussions with the elders and leaders within. The lack of walls is also a spiritual form of respect toward the *negeri*'s ancestors, allowing them to arrive and depart freely during gatherings.



Fig. 5. Interior of the Church of Soya, which was burned and destroyed during the conflict. It was reconstructed according to its original design.

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 [17]. 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.

A prominent example of the cultural depth of these symbols is a ritual of the *negeri* of Soya called *cuci negeri* [18]. 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. Other important intangible symbols include cultural traditions such as *sasi*, *masohi*, *badati*, *maaren* and *maano* [17].

Preservation strategies and increasing public awareness

Preservation 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. Particularly in Ambon, where land is strongly connected to cultural rights and beliefs, relocating the object is discouraged [17]. To the contrary, the emphasis should be placed on respecting the original condition of the 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 preservation project [19]. 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.

Those closest to the objects and symbols in question should be the primary agents driving the preservation. The benefit of this approach is that the intrinsic cultural significance of the objects and symbols can be better maintained [9]. 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 [20]. 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 [21].

In Indonesia, both the Central Government and the local Ambonese Government can offer crucial backing to the conversation 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 [22]. 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 [23]. Therefore, this is an excellent opportunity to right the damage caused by Soeharto Regime's oppressive rule [24,25]. Until now, most research on cultural objects in Indonesia has been done in the context of tourism development [26,27]. More efforts should be undertaken to develop preservation as a means to support culture and identity, such as those in *negeri*.

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 [14]. Religious segregation can threaten the conservation effort if not properly anticipated. 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 [13]. 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 [13,28]. 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 [28]. The conservation of cultural objects and symbols is one way to ensure the tradition remains living for future generations.

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 [29]. 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 [30].

Conclusions

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 [15]. 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*.

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