Conversion and Colonialism: Islam and Christianity in North Sulawesi, c. 1700-1900

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CHAPTER 6
Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the causation of mass conversions to Islam in Bolaang-Mongondow and to Protestant Christianity in Sangir-Talaud and Minahasa. It examines these regions individually and analyzes the respective political, economic, and social milieus within which these conversions occurred. It demonstrates that despite deviations in particularities, the mass conversions to world religions in these regions broadly shared similar causations. It places emphasis on particular periods in the nineteenth-century when the Dutch colonial state centralized political authority and imposed census-based monetary taxation with the aim of commercializing the economy. It points to these reforms as the immediate triggers that enabled both Dutch apical rulers and especially indigenous apical rulers to weaken the authority of subaltern chiefs. It illustrates that these reforms were weaved into the religious conversion agenda of rulers as a strategy to further consolidate authority by depriving the subaltern chiefs of their functionally undifferentiated and socially embedded authority. As such, this dissertation shows that the apical rulers could expand their political and economic reach while paving the way for their claimed subjects to access prestigious religious identities, which had hitherto been exclusive to the ruling elite.

1. Demand-side and supply-side causation

The dissertation has presented a two-pronged explanation to the question of causation to conversion. On the one hand, there is the external trigger—the supply side—or the colonially induced political centralization and fiscal expansion. On the other hand, there is the internal motivation—the demand side—or the intention of the people to access a cosmopolitan religious identity that represented material, symbolic, and relational freedom from the constrictive old order.

However, while this dissertation endorses these complementary "supply" and "demand" causal sides, extant historical sources tend to almost exclusively focus on the former. Given the lack of egodocuments from people who were converting to Christianity or Islam, it is difficult to identify the essentially personal and motivational factors that constituted the "demand-side" causes of conversion. As such, one can often only guess at what motivated people to convert to

Islam or Christianity when they did. On the other hand, the archival records of various colonial institutions describe the events surrounding the chiefly and mass conversions in Minahasa, Bolaang-Mongondow, and Sangir-Talaud. These records make it possible to infer the probable "supply-side" causes of the chiefly and mass conversions. Notwithstanding the uncertainty inherent in acts of inference, the core argument stands: mass religious conversions were underpinned by the centralization of authority and commercialization of economy that undercut the traditional authority of the local chiefly elite and opened the pathway for many ordinary people to access a cosmopolitan religious identity.

The dissertation's emphasis on the intentions and motivations of key social actors within the broader context of state, society, and market to understand religious conversion challenges existing views on conversion. While the seemingly influential "expanding horizon theory" highlights the motivation of actors to access a cosmopolitan religious identity, it fails to take into account the equally crucial social forces that prevented or facilitated access to such cosmopolitanism. The "trade theory" points to the desire of likely converts for the legal and political stability that world religions provide. However, evidence from north Sulawesi points not to religion but to the colonial state as the ultimate arbiter of disputes and the source of political legitimacy. While not denying the attraction of commerce as a motivation to convert, this dissertation highlights serious impediments to deep and frequent contacts between the traders and most ordinary inhabitants of north Sulawesi. These included the chiefly monopoly of trade, which was perhaps most important of these impediments.

The "missionary theory" suggests the pivotal role of missionaries not only in the elite but also in the mass conversions. This can readily be confuted by the fact that there was a disproportionately small number of missionaries in comparison with the large number of converts. Also, the presence of both Islamic and Christian missionaries in north Sulawesi (and their attendant successes, if any) were often under the sponsorship of the incumbent political authorities. The "comprehensive social crisis theory" points to the immense social disruption following colonial intervention that made the people "susceptible" to proselytization as it responded to the people's supposed "spiritual vacuum." However, in the case of north Sulawesi, one can argue that the disruption caused by colonial rule was not so much a generalized crisis but a social transformation resulting from the reconfiguration of local chiefly authority. The local chiefs remained in power, but their numbers were reduced and their authority was streamlined to

fit the designs of expanding Dutch colonial rule. Although the internal motivation of individual converts remains difficult, if not impossible, to unravel, this dissertation interprets the general willingness of inhabitants to convert not as a result of a "spiritual vacuum" but of the freeing of the inhabitants from the social restrictions of the old order.

The "bottom-up theory," this dissertation suggests, supplies an important yet incomplete element in the conversion phenomenon. Religion in north Sulawesi possibly had a socially liberating and equalizing effect, and the would-be converts were likely imbued by the desire to acquire an identity similar to the elites. However, this theory lacks the conceptual tools to explain the social mechanisms of how such an intention to convert could be translated into actual conversion. The "marriage theory" directs attention to the role of cross-cultural marriages as a key factor to conversion. However, while marriages indeed were—and still are—a reason to convert, it cannot explain the rapid and almost contemporaneous conversions to Islam or Christianity in two vast regions of north Sulawesi. In addition, widespread cross-cultural marriages between foreign traders and local women would have been limited given the small number of traders in the area.

To recapitulate, while a number of these theories hint at important parts of the causal narrative of conversions in north Sulawesi (notably, the socially liberating nature of conversions and the pivotal role of the colonial state), they are silent on a key aspect—the dynamics of intra-elite competition. This aspect is, therefore, one of the main elements emphasized in the individual causal narratives of conversion.

2. Elite conversions and relative status

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, this dissertation has presented how religion functioned as a mark of elite status for a long time. Christianity, as propagated by the Dutch East India Company and weaved into the elite fabric of local societies in the region, served as a distinguishing marker for the ruling chiefly class alongside its explicit function of strengthening the ties between the Company and its local vassals. In this way, Protestant Christianity became a convenient layer of elite identity on top of the older and deeper social affiliations based on familial ties and descent. In addition, the case of Sangir in the early nineteenth-century, exceptional as it may seem, reveals that Christianity was already invoked not only as an elite status marker but also as a moral language for the local chiefly class to sanction each other.

The north Sulawesi polities ruled by Christian rajas also received an occasional inspection of a Dutch pastor who likely only had a tangential influence on the social lives of the majority of the people ruled by self-professed Christian rajas. These rajas were also obligated to support Christian schoolteachers who often, and perhaps mainly, served as scribes who wrote missives on behalf of the raja to the Company and as Malay language teachers to the children of the local elite. The Company's deployment of schoolmasters in north Sulawesi was a part of the Company's geopolitical strategy to protect the north Sulawesi region from possible foreign intrusions since it was adjacent to the valuable Company outposts in Maluku.

However, the prestigious position occupied by Christianity gradually eroded in consonance with the decline of the Company and the consequent weakness of colonial authority in the peripheral areas of the Indonesian archipelago. Various micro-polities in north Sulawesi saw their rulers convert to Islam beginning with Buol around the 1780s and spreading eastwards to Bolaang-Mongondow in the 1840s. Siau in Sangir would have had in Jacob Ponto its first Muslim ruler in the 1850s, if not for the decision of some authorities to require him to convert to Christianity as a precondition to rule and as a measure to "preserve" Christianity in the archipelago. Minahasa is an exception in this regard, not only because its core settlements were found inland and, therefore, largely isolated from the earlier wave of ruler conversions, but also because of the relatively vigorous support for the Christian missions in the nineteenth century. Despite these differences, the pattern of early Christianization in Minahasa, as in the coastal polities in the previous century, was by and large limited to the local elite.

Although ruler or elite conversions to Company-sponsored Christianity and "maritime Islam" seem to have had different modalities, they were transmitted through and, therefore, refracted by elite interests. Unlike the earlier conversion to Christianity, ruler conversion to Islam in the region—especially that of the raja of Bolaang-Mongondow—was less explicitly propelled by the maintenance of local political authority. Rather, it was likely tied to the ruler's desire to partake of the economic benefits arising from the emergence of an "Islamic" regional economy led by the Arabs and Bugis.

The chiefly elite was very likely aware that while access to Islamic trade was an important economic channel to tap, conversion to Islam and contacts with various Muslim trading communities carried attendant political risks. They were averse to the extreme political flux to which the polities of north Sulawesi were inherently vulnerable, given the political

weakness of their indigenous elite. This was exemplified by the rapid change of rulers in Islamized Buol and Tolitoli, where the indigenous elite was eventually eclipsed by the powerful family led by the trader and mystic, Syarif Ali.

Such a risk was likely mitigated by mechanisms, such as the aristocratic marriage of wealthy and powerful Muslim traders to a member of the aristocracy (like the marriage between Syarif Aluwi and Hontinimbang of Mongondow), and the continued political and military patronage of the Dutch (as was the case in Gorontalo). Through these strategies the traditional elite sought to subsume religion under the traditional system of political authority and high relative status based on descent from a prestigious family line. Though marriage as a modality of religious conversion appears unique to Islam, it nonetheless shared the same objective of elite conversions to Christianity from the earlier period—to maintain the preponderance of indigenous elite rule and to utilize religion as an additional layer of status difference, rather than as a tool to challenge the traditional order.

However, while the affirmation of elite status difference widened the gap between the emergent social classes, it likely narrowed the social distance among the members of the constantly competing ruling elite who now shared not only the legitimacy from descent but also from religious affiliation. An aspiring apical ruler acting as the main sponsor of mass conversions to a world religion could effectively question and break the long-standing political and economic advantages claimed by subaltern chiefs, whose political legitimacy and social prestige were partly drawn from religious affiliation. The apical chief and other elites just under him could therefore, in theory, appear benevolent by sharing with the rest of the population a hitherto exclusive religious identity that symbolized prestige and wealth. However, underneath the explicit conversion agenda was the economic and political dividend that could accrue to the apical chief and his allies if the domestic economic pie was increased and political authority centralized.

This chiefly ambition to consolidate authority under the banner of religious conversion could not, however, be realized without sheer and incontestable political authority. To that end, the intensified presence of the colonial state in north Sulawesi was particularly crucial.

3. Conversion, colonial reforms, and the consolidation of chiefly authority

The colonial reforms of the nineteenth century, this dissertation argues, provided the immediate impetus for the slackening of the traditional bonds between the local chiefs and their subjects. These reforms likewise proffered unprecedented authority to the apical chief, which allowed him to centralize his rule and consequently succeed in folding the agenda of centralization into a project of religious conversion. As Heather Sutherland suggests, "kings" in the "maritime polities of Southeast Asia" had long strived to use "religious and cultural strategies" to counter the "centrifugal tendencies inherent in geography and the mobile nature of their primary economic resource—trade."[1] In the case of north Sulawesi, the authority of the colonial state provided crucial avenues for apical rulers to centralize. Two instances of colonial reforms appear instrumental. The first instance is the set of reforms implemented in the 1840s and 1850s under Residents van Olpen and Jansen, and the second instance is the set of reforms implemented in the 1880s and 1890s under Residents Stakman and Jellesma.

3.1. Minahasa

In Minahasa, the first significant increase of Christian conversions likely began in the late 1840s when van Olpen allowed the payment of *recepis* (copper certificates) instead of the obligatory rice deliveries. These *recepis* functioned as de facto money and thus substituted for the scarce copper coins. Under the previous system, the colonial state required the local chiefs to deliver a specified amount of rice (along with coffee) in exchange for textiles. The chiefs in turn redistributed the textiles to their subjects in the uplands more as gifts than as commodities. Such an imposed "barter system" naturally inhibited the growth of markets as the economic surplus was controlled by the state and the chiefs—thus concentrating unrealized market power on the lower levels of Minahasan society. However, van Olpen's order to accept *recepis* likely encouraged ordinary Minahasans to exchange their rice produce at a more competitive price and perhaps even without the mediation of their chiefs. Consequently, Minahasans, who were hitherto limited by the chiefly constraints of venturing into autonomous commerce, could sell

[1] Sutherland, "Power, Trade and Islam in the Eastern Archipelagos,"*Religion and Development: Towards an Integrated Approach*, 155.

their rice produce at prices determined by market conditions and acquire textiles at cheaper prices.

However, the imposition of census-based monetary taxation and its attendant political reforms seem to have posed the most serious challenge to local chiefly authority and to local monopolies. These occurred in Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow in the 1850s and in Sangir-Talaud in the 1890s. Resident Jansen (1853-1859) was well known for his wide-ranging reforms that forcibly commercialized the economy of Minahasa. He promoted the planting of cash crops (maize, abaca, cacao, tobacco, and especially coffee) and more importantly, abolished the obligatory rice deliveries in exchange for monetary taxation. The rule that had been in place since the beginning of the cultivation system prohibiting Minahasans to migrate from one *walak* (village confederation) to another was revoked—likely facilitating the (seasonal) movement of cash-seeking laborers to more prosperous regions. To hasten the implementation of colonial fiscal and economic reforms, Resident Jansen consolidated colonial authority by abolishing the traditional commercial role of chiefs while strengthening their limited political authority. Some of the most important beneficiaries of these reforms were the higher-ranking chiefs (*hukum besar*) who saw their previously tenuous and often peer-contested authority assured and even amplified by the colonial state.

Riding on the back of the colonial state, local chiefs sought political consolidation under the banner of religious conversion. For instance, empowered by Jansen's reforms, O. J. Pelenkahu, the *hukum besar* of Tonsea, effectively limited the local chiefs' ability to compete for the power and status that they needed to be considered as serious contenders for the position of the paramount chief of Tonsea in three ways. First, Pelenkahu actively promoted the integration of the rice economy by establishing a rice market in the uplands. This prevented the local chiefs from arbitraging the upland-lowland rice trade to realize a profit. Second, Pelenkahu prohibited the lower chiefs from sponsoring status-giving "pagan" feasts (*fosso*). Third, Pelenkahu encouraged and succeeded in bringing about his claimed subjects' conversion to Christianity.

In effect, Pelenkahu replicated Jansen's Minahasa-wide agenda of centralization through Christianization, but on a smaller scale. Like Jansen, Pelenkahu successfully implemented economic and political changes that limited the competing chiefs' traditional privileges and monopolies which, in turn, allowed them to challenge his authority. Christianity likely served as a symbolic instrument for realizing Pelenkahu's chiefly consolidation. For example, Pelenkahu's

prohibition of potlatch rituals sponsored by other chiefs could be justified as a logical consequence of his people turning towards Christianity and away from animism. This potentially not only undercut the competing chiefs' symbolic authority but also increased Pelenkahu's authority.

This dissertation's use of colonial and local consolidation of authority as lenses to view the Christianization of Minahasa thus departs from the earlier explanations of mass conversions in the region. While previous scholars attribute mass conversions to a purported widespread social breakdown,[2] this dissertation points to the dynamics of local chiefly politics under the umbrella of colonial state centralization.

3.2. Bolaang-Mongondow

In Bolaang-Mongondow, contemporaneous "modernizing" colonial reforms were also introduced. After Jansen toured the Mongondow uplands which were largely unknown to the colonial state, he ordered the imposition of census-based monetary taxation (*hasil*). However, unlike Minahasa, where the colonial state had a deeper and more extensive presence as a consequence of forced coffee cultivation, Bolaang-Mongondow remained relatively autonomous until the early twentieth century, when a permanent colonial functionary was placed in the uplands. The lack of a colonial presence resulted in Jansen's reformist fiscal policy being exclusively channeled through the Mongondorese political elite—especially the raja. The raja, backed by the colonial state, then issued an order that allowed the uplanders to trade without the mediation of their lower chiefs in order to facilitate monetary accumulation in view of monetary taxation. This gave the raja greater political power and financial resources (from taxes) than he could possibly have accumulated under the traditional system of trade.

This dissertation argues that in both Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow, these essentially economic and political reforms assumed an explicitly religious character. Perhaps motivated by the desire—among others—to undercut the authority of subaltern chiefs, the raja of Bolaang-Mongondow used his new power from the colonial state to encourage the Islamic conversion of his claimed subjects. He facilitated the commercial contact between coastal

[2] Schouten, *Leadership and Social Mobility in a Southeast Asian Society: Minahasa, 1677-1983*; Buchholt, "Christian Mission and Social Development,"*Kolonien und Missionen, Referate des 3. Internationalen Kolonialengeschichtlichen Symposiums 1993 in Bremen*.

Muslim traders and the unconverted uplanders, and opened Bolaang-Mongondow's religious school (likely a *pondok*) to the recent converts. The raja's conflation of religious conversion with economic expansion and political consolidation was an effective strategy. A compelling hint of his success were the pockets of resistance among local chiefs whose respective positions had been circumvented. For example, the Mokoginta family led similarly dissatisfied chiefs to resist the raja by refusing to pay taxes collected for the raja and by declaring one of its family members as a raja in his own right. In their own bailiwick (Passi), Islamization was markedly slow. A later Mokoginta descendant was a known sympathizer of Christian missions, which was likely a consequence of the family's traditional antagonism to the Islamizing and centralizing raja.

In Bolaang-Mongondow, as in Minahasa, the choice of religion of the uppermost elite through which colonial centralization took place was seemingly path dependent. Permanent Christian missionaries had been present in Minahasa since the 1820s and the conversion of its chiefs took place even earlier. The main difference between the conversions in Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow lies, most obviously, in the incomparably more encompassing role played by the colonial state in Minahasa. Resident Jansen (and later Resident Stakman) was even unusually explicit in his staunch support of Christianization. Jansen was a figure who demonstrated an all-encompassing authority (religious, political, and economic) even through the Dutch colonial state maintained a secular policy in which the religious sphere was separate from the political-economic sphere. However, in Bolaang-Mongondow, the main vectors of religious authority (particularly the Arabs) were not allowed to have real political power; instead, they were confined to the religious and commercial spheres of social life. As a result, even after ruler and mass conversions, the raja of Bolaang-Mongondow maintained a more considerable degree of political authority in contrast to his Minahasan counterparts. Nonetheless, in both Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow, both Christianity and Islam served to circumvent the authority of the local chiefly elite, who likely clung to their traditional entitlements and status difference partly based on their not sharing their religious identity with their subjects.

It should also be pointed out that the Islamization of Bolaang-Mongondow in the nineteenth century mirrors, to a certain degree, the contours of Islamization in neighboring Gorontalo. In the early modern period, the Dutch East India Company underpinned the political survival of Gorontalo's indigenous elite vis-à-vis the increasingly influential Bugis merchants even as the apical ruler (Monoarfa), himself a loyal client of the Dutch, sponsored Islamization.

Bolaang-Mongondow mirrors Gorontalo in the use by its apical ruler (A. C. Manoppo) of Dutch authority to sponsor Islamization. In doing so, Manoppo was motivated, at least partly, by the desire to expand influence and subvert his opponents (the competing chiefs of Mongondow). The fact that it occurred in Bolaang-Mongondow in the nineteenth-century and not in the earlier period as it did in Gorontalo can be attributed to the deficiency of a profitable economic resource to attract the Dutch to settle in Mongondow. The profits arising from monetary poll taxation in nineteenth-century Mongondow underpinned Dutch interest in the region while it was the gold trade that attracted the Dutch in Gorontalo in the previous century. This dissertation thus affirms an earlier view that the "Islamization of Indonesia would be furthered, in extent as well as in depth, by the extension of the *Pax Neerlandica*."[3]

3.3. Sangir-Talaud

The case of Sangir-Talaud differs from both Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow in that the modernizing colonial reforms occurred four decades later. However, while Sangir had long shared the designation of Christian region with Minahasa, its religious politics for the most part of the nineteenth century seems more comparable with that of Bolaang-Mongondow. The absence of economic and political reforms that undercut local chiefly authority and the need to maintain a modicum of colonial governance necessitated the governmental defense of the Sangirese traditional elite. This need likely strengthened the authority of Jacob Ponto, the ruler of Siau, one of Sangir's most important polities. However, unlike Bolaang-Mongondow, the arena of possibilities for chiefly consolidation in Sangir-Talaud was more limited. Politics from the colonial metropole and the personal convictions of various high-ranking functionaries maintained Protestant Christianity among Sangir's ruling elite. Therefore Ponto, unlike the raja of Bolaang-Mongondow and despite being born into an Islamized aristocratic family (Bolaang-Itang), could not initiate the Islamic conversion of his subjects. Likewise, Ponto could not use Christianization like his Minahasan counterparts did to further consolidate his power because he regarded the missionary-artisans in Sangir as competitors to his own local political pre-eminence. As a result, Ponto's strategy for political consolidation was not to initiate conversions to world religions but to continue, perhaps even intensify, the traditional "big man" offensive—

[3] Harry Benda, "Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje and the Foundations of Dutch Islamic Policy in Indonesia," *The Journal of Modern History* 30, no. 4 (1958): 341-342.

headhunting rituals and other religio-communal gatherings (for instance, the *tulude*—likely similar to Minahasan *fosso*)—while maintaining close clientelistic relationship with colonial authorities. Such a strategy notably operated and thrived outside the formal and institutionalized religious domain of the missionary-artisans whom Ponto sought to undermine.

The political and economic reforms of the late 1880s ultimately brought about Ponto's fall from power. These reforms initiated by Residents Stakman and Jellesma mirrored closely those of Jansen in the 1850s, which included streamlining the local chiefly hierarchy (especially in Talaud), introducing a census-based monetary taxation, and requiring cash-mediated exchanges. Because Ponto was considered as a hindrance to the realization of these goals, he was dismissed and exiled to Java. His unceremonious removal from office and the bloody pacification of Arangkaä (Talaud) a few years later likely instilled in the Sangirese and Talaurese the supremacy of their Dutch colonial overlords, as had been the case in Minahasa during the Tondano war in the early nineteenth century.

These colonial centralizing regulations, as in the 1850s Minahasa, were couched in the language of Christian conversions. Stakman was explicit in his desire to convert the Talaurese, who were expected to follow the conversion of their Minahasan and Sangirese neighbors. However, despite Stakman's expectation, the dynamics of mass conversions—as in Bolaang-Mongondow and Minahasa—seem to have followed the logic of local politics. In places where colonial authority effectively backed the local ruler (Lirung, for instance), the apical chief became more invested in the conversion of his subjects as he likely saw himself not only as a handmaiden of colonial rule but also as a direct beneficiary of the political and economic dividends arising from mass conversions.

4. Conversion and the promise of social liberation

Finally, although this dissertation focuses mainly on the "supply side" causes of conversions to Christianity and Islam in north Sulawesi, it recognizes the importance of the "demand side" causation, despite the lack of sources in which people described their process of conversion or that of other people. There were likely varied personal motivations for the individual Sangirese, Minahasan, and Mongondorese to convert, which ranged from personal reasons to economic and political motives. This dissertation suggests, however, that there are sociologically demonstrable reasons why conversion to Islam or Christianity could have been

seen as beneficial. Foremost among these are reasons related to the possibility of symbolically and materially increasing one's status. In Sangir, schooling was limited to the local elite. In Minahasa, the traditional communal structure (*kalakeran*) was reserved exclusively for the chiefly class. However, Christianity expanded these social spaces for the previously marginalized classes. In Bolaang-Mongondow, Islamic conversions likely undermined the old system of property rights that allowed only the uppermost elites to own certain luxury goods. While the local indigenous elites reinforced their status-difference through familial descent, non-elites likely rallied around Islam—a cosmopolitan and prestigious social identity that had the potential to curtail the traditional elite entitlements.