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

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Summary

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This dissertation deals with the roughly contemporaneous conversion to Islam and Christianity in the three sub-regions of north Sulawesi. In particular, it explains the causes of elite and mass conversions to Islam in Bolaang-Mongondow and to Protestant Christianity in Minahasa and Sangir-Talaud in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It devotes special attention to the nineteenth century transformations in the colonial political economy and their broader social and religious consequences in the region. It illustrates that notwithstanding local particularities, the mass conversions to Islam and Christianity in these areas shared a similar cause. This dissertation thus diverges from the existing scholarly literature on Indonesia that often views Christian and Islamic conversions as separate phenomena having distinct and divergent roots.

This dissertation argues that the immediate impetus for mass conversions was the centralizing reforms of the Dutch colonial state in the nineteenth century. These reforms loosened traditional patron-client bonds and consequently provided non-elites with access to material wealth and prestigious social affiliations—notably, membership to a world religion—that had been exclusively for the ruling elite. In some cases, apical chiefs whose positions were strengthened by the colonial state, became invested in the promotion of religious conversion among the non-elites. This was a strategy of the apical chiefs to facilitate the centralizing of power in their realms. As differences in status decreased between subaltern chiefs and their subjects, the apical chiefs not only gained greater cultural legitimacy but also claimed political authority over the converted.

By focusing on the political and economic aspects of conversion (and in particular, the role and motivations of the chiefly elite), this dissertation points to the inadequacy of some important conventional theories of conversion in the literature on Indonesia. For instance, what could be called as the "bottom-up theory" points to the widely shared desire to convert to a cosmopolitan religious identity; but it fails to consider the inevitable social forces that allow or hinder access to such identity. Meanwhile, the "trade theory" ascribes mass conversions to the attraction to the overseas connections, legal framework, and interpersonal trust—features associated with a world religion. However, sustained and frequent interactions between overseas traders and the majority of the masses were likely absent in north Sulawesi since the chiefs monopolized external trade and

prohibited their claimed subjects to engage in commerce. Besides, historical evidence suggests that the Dutch colonial state acted as the primary provider of political stability and as mediator of last resort at the time when the peoples of north Sulawesi were converting to Islam or Christianity. Finally, the "comprehensive social crisis theory" points to a massive breakdown of traditional society that induced widespread spiritual uncertainty, which in turn predisposed the population to accept foreign religious identities. But in north Sulawesi, the end of the traditional order was less catastrophic than the "comprehensive social crisis theory" would suggest. There were marked continuities in the social and political structures of indigenous societies. In addition, and perhaps more crucially, the motivation of the masses seems to have been driven less by "spiritual uncertainty" and more by the abiding desire to emulate the elite. Overall, these theories, among others discussed more fully in the dissertation, devote inadequate attention to the political dynamics of the local society.

Considering the shortcomings of the existing theories, this dissertation proposes that "demand-side" and "supply-side" factors as important analytical variables in understanding both Islamic and Christian conversions. The term, demand side, refers to the desire of north Sulawesi non-elites to adopt cosmopolitan religious identities in order to achieve status equivalence with the ruling elite. This dissertation shows that this desire was, however, frustrated by the elites who resisted mass conversions in the same way that they opposed mass ownership of prestige goods. Elite opposition to conversions was a political strategy to maintain social differences in the context of intense status competition between apical chiefs and subaltern chiefs to be the paramount leaders of their respective polities in north Sulawesi. The term, supply side, refers to the centralizing policies of the Dutch colonial state in the nineteenth century that streamlined local political authority, commercialized the regional economy, and introduced monetary taxation. These policies were first implemented in Minahasa in the 1850s and later applied in other regions since Dutch colonial interests had focused mainly on Minahasa.

The dynamics between the demand-side and supply-side factors played out differently in the various sub-regions of north Sulawesi. In Minahasa, the period of mass conversions to Christianity began during the liberal rule of the colonial Resident A. J. van Olpen (1843-1849) and intensified during the tenure of Resident A. J. F. Jansen (1853-1859). Van Olpen, and especially Jansen, promoted the use of monetary instruments as the medium of exchange and taxation as well as sought the abolition of obligatory rice deliveries in exchange for textiles. The liberal policies of

the period likewise streamlined local authority and effectively bureaucratized the Minahasan chiefs. The chiefs—especially the subaltern ones—were made to shed their commercial roles as traders and were limited to the role of tax collectors for the colonial state. In general, these economic and political reforms loosened the hold of the subaltern chiefs over their claimed subjects who in turn could access Christianity—the prestige religion of the Minahasan chiefly classes since the Company times. The case of O. J. Pelenkahu, the Christian chief of Tonsea, illustrates the above dynamics. Pelenkahu succeeded in undermining the authority of the subaltern chiefs, who competed with him for power, through the use of the colonial state's authority. He took away the lower chiefs' commercial monopolies in rice and prevented them from holding pagan potlatch rituals (*fosso*) on the pretext that these indigenous religious rituals ran counter to efforts promote Christianity. Pelenkahu's success in doing so led to achieving political supremacy in his district under the Dutch-sanctioned banner of Christianization. He thus re-affirmed the symbolic efficacy, power, and status long associated with Christianity while exposing the loss of authority of the pagan subaltern chiefs.

In Bolaang-Mongondow, the first recorded mass conversions to Islam likewise occurred during the period of colonial centralization in the 1850s. In order to implement the drastic fiscal and political reforms, the colonial state strengthened the authority of the apical ruler (A. C. Manoppo, the raja of Bolaang-Mongondow). Manoppo, like his Minahasan counterpart O. J. Pelenkahu, took advantage of this opportunity to weaken the authority of competing chiefs and to centralize his own in the following way. Whereas the subaltern chiefs of the Bolaang-Mongondow uplands prevented their subjects from trading along the coast and establishing contacts with Muslim traders, Raja A. C. Manoppo encouraged the opposite. With such policy, Raja A. C. Manoppo enlarged the tax base of his realm and fulfilled his fiscal obligations to his political patron—the Dutch colonial state. Manoppo's promotion of Islam was another cultural strategy to undermine the authority of the subaltern chiefs especially because religion had long been a mark of status difference of the subaltern chiefs with their subjects. In Mongondow, as in Minahasa, there was considerable resistance among the weakened chiefly elite. The Mokoginta family of the Passi district for instance, opposed the authority of the Manoppos by leading a faction of chiefs who resisted paying the taxes that the raja demanded. The members of the Mokoginta family resisted the Islamization of their subjects as much as they resisted the centralization of the

Manoppo rajas. It suggests therefore that the mass conversion to Islam in Mongondow was closely associated with the political consolidation by the apical ruler of the realm.

In Sangir-Talaud, the colonial reforms that were described in Minahasa and Bolaang-Mongondow in the 1850s occurred only around 1890s. As a consequence, the chiefs maintained their traditional authority and remained powerful in countering the Christian missionary offensive. For instance, Jacob Ponto, the apical chief of Siau, was long successful in his resistance to the European "missionary-artisans" who had been appointed by the colonial government. Ponto sponsored head-hunting expeditions and celebrated large "pagan" gatherings to enhance his authority. However, the sweeping reforms of Residents M. C. E Stakman and E. J. Jellesma in the late 1880s and 1890s ultimately brought about the downfall of Ponto. These reformist Residents sought to further commercialize the economy by instituting census-based monetary poll taxation and by obliging cash-mediated exchanges. They also streamlined the local chiefly offices and demonstrated the sheer military prowess of the Dutch colonial state through a strategic military pacification campaign. In Sangir-Talaud, as in Bolaang-Mongondow and Minahasa, these reforms had broad societal consequences. In Siau, for example, the islanders of Makelehi were freed from the oppressive economic and political ties with Siau's ruling elite, and especially Jacob Ponto. In a few years, many of these islanders became active members of the local Christian church which by then likely became the locus of a communal life notably without the authoritative—and often oppressive—figure of the local raja.

This dissertation thus reveals the shared causation of elite and mass conversions to Islam and Christianity in colonial Indonesia. It takes into account the shared motivations of the people who were converting without losing sight of the broader political and economic shifts. This dissertation likewise emphasizes the varying dynamics of social competition among the indigenous elite that had been hitherto under-recognized in the literature on religious conversions.