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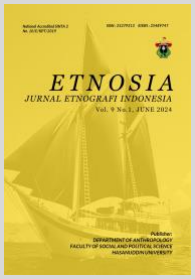

Negotiating the Sacred and the Profane: The Kase Nae Tiang Alif Ritual of the Makeang People

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ABSTRACT

Studies on local Islam in Indonesia have predominantly focused on Java and other major islands, leaving limited attention to the dynamics of Islamic practice in Eastern Indonesia. This article deals with a religious ritual of Makeang community by examining the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual as an expression of syncretic religiosity. The ritual, which is part of a mosque construction procession, merges sacred elements—such as prayers led by a *hakim syara* (Islamic judge)—with profane performances like the *ronggeng togal* dance. This ethnographic study was conducted in Ngofabobawa Village, Malifut District, North Maluku Province, between 2016 and 2019, employing participant observation and in-depth interviews with 23 informants of diverse backgrounds. The research findings show that the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual reflects the community's negotiation between Islamic values, local cosmology, and ecological relationships. It serves not only as a religious act, but it also as a mechanism for communal solidarity and cultural continuity. The sacralization of the Tiang Alif (sacred pillar) demonstrates that local religiosity is rooted in symbolic practices that merge the divine and the material worlds. It is argued in this article that the ritual represents a space of negotiation between sacred and profane domains in the formation of local Islamic identity. This negotiation occurs through community participation, sensory expressions, and symbolic performances.

1. Introduction

The intersection between religion and local culture within Muslim communities in Indonesia has long been a central focus in anthropology and religious studies. Rather than treating religion as an autonomous and closed system, anthropological approaches frame it as a socially constructed phenomenon, shaped by historical contingencies, power relations, and local cultural contexts (Bowen, 1993). Within this framework, religious practices at the local level often exhibit syncretic characteristics—namely, the blending of religious doctrines and symbols with indigenous customs and cultural expressions. This phenomenon is particularly evident in a variety of rituals that creatively and complexly integrate the sacred and the profane.

In various Islamic traditions across the Indonesian archipelago, religious practices do not merely reflect normative teachings but also represent the result of a long-standing interaction between Islamic values and deeply rooted local cultures that predate the arrival of Islam itself (Laffan, 2003; Mohd Mokhtar et al., 2018; Mokhtar & Sa'ari, 2016; Woodward, 1988). From an anthropological perspective, religion is not conceived as a homogeneous or static system, but rather as a social product continually open to the negotiation of meaning within specific historical and cultural contexts. A wide range of rituals found in local Muslim communities often reveal practices that creatively and complexly combine the sacred and the profane (Dute et al., 2021; Wirata, 2018). This resonates with Clifford Geertz's (1960b) seminal study of Javanese Islam, which emphasized the pluralistic nature of religious expression as a form of local adaptation to Islamic teachings.

Several studies over the past decade have demonstrated how syncretic practices not only persist but continue to thrive across various cultural and religious contexts. The *slametan* and *tahlilan* traditions among Javanese communities, for instance, have become emblematic of a form of local Islam that merges Islamic prayers with the social and cultural values of the local populace. Such practices are not only accepted as part of religious life but also function as mechanisms for strengthening social cohesion and maintaining communal harmony (Kholil, 2008; Afandi, 2023; and Mohd Mokhtar et al. 2018). Even in the context of religious pluralism—such as slametan ceremonies that involve non-Muslim neighbours—values of tolerance and diversity become integral to the religious expression itself (Akhda, 2017; Indra & Salikurrahman, 2024; Salim, 2013).

This phenomenon is not limited to Java; similar expressions of syncretism can also be found in eastern and maritime regions of Indonesia. In Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi, the Makkuliwa Lopi ritual illustrates the integration of maritime cultural values and Islamic teachings within a complex ritual structure (Muliadi, dkk, 2024). Meanwhile, among Muslim communities in Bali, elements of Hindu-Balinese culture continue to be embedded in local Islamic expressions, contributing to the formation of a distinct religious identity (Pageh, 2018). These studies underscore the fact that local Islam does not evolve according to a

singular pattern, but is deeply contextual, shaped by local histories, cultural dynamics, and configurations of power (Alimuddin et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, local Islamic practices are not always accepted without resistance. In some cases, tensions arise between institutionalized understandings of sacredness—often upheld by religious authorities—and the profane practices embraced by local communities. Sunandar and Tomi (2023) observe that local traditions such as the recitation of mantras or the use of sacred objects are frequently contested by groups that adhere to more scripturalist interpretations of Islam. In this context, it is crucial to understand that religious rituals are not neutral spaces; rather, they serve as arenas where social, political, and religious symbols are negotiated (Turner, 1995). Symbols within rituals play a vital role not only in constructing theological narratives but also in maintaining social structures and conveying cultural meanings. The Tiang Alif (Alif Pole) in the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual, for instance, carries a dual significance: on the one hand, it symbolizes the oneness of God as understood in Islamic cosmology, and on the other, it functions as a social binder among Makeang residents and as a marker of genealogical ties with their ancestors. This symbolic approach highlights that many symbols in indigenous religious practices serve a dual purpose—as spiritual conduits and as instruments of social cohesion (Al-Amri & Haramain, 2017).

Beyond symbolism, performative arts such as dance and music also play a vital role in local Islamic ritual practices. In the context of Kase Nae Tiang Alif, the presence of ronggeng togal dance and traditional music forms an inseparable part of the ritual structure. However, this performative dimension has received relatively little scholarly attention. Most of the literature on local Islam continues to focus on prayer, *dhikr* (remembrance of God), pilgrimage, and *slametan* rituals. Yet, performance elements such as dance and music often serve as important mediums for shaping a religious atmosphere and for symbolically reproducing communal values. This study seeks to address this gap by highlighting how profane cultural expressions—frequently marginalized within normative Islamic discourse—possess their own form of sacrality within local ritual spaces.

In a broader context, the study of local Islam is closely tied to issues of identity and diversity. In the era of digitalization and globalization, Muslim communities across various regions continue to uphold traditional rituals as a means of preserving their collective identity (Wahid & Rahim, 2024). In the case of the Makeang community, the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual functions not only as a spiritual practice but also as a platform to reinforce communal solidarity, commemorate ancestral lineages, and strengthen ties between the village and its diaspora. Thus, religious practices serve as a vital instrument for shaping collective memory and fostering a sense of unity amid the challenges of modernity.

Islam as practiced in North Maluku—where the Makeang community resides—has not been transmitted solely through normative channels of central religious authority but has undergone a process of localization. This has enabled adaptation, reinterpretation, and even the incorporation of older elements into

new religious practices. Such dynamics demonstrate that religion is not merely a set of doctrines, but a way of life deeply rooted in the social and symbolic landscape of local communities.

Studies on local Islam in Eastern Indonesia—particularly in Halmahera and the Maluku Islands—remain limited, despite the region's rich cultural complexity and diverse religious expressions that are largely absent from mainstream academic literature. As such, this study occupies a strategic position in expanding the discourse on Islamic pluralism in Indonesia and offers new perspectives on how Muslim communities in archipelagic regions creatively negotiate the relationship between the sacred and the profane in their everyday lives.

One practice that reflects this dynamic is Kase Nae Tiang Alif, a distinctive ritual of the Makeang people who reside in North Halmahera. As an ethnolinguistic group dispersed across several islands, the Makeang have a long history of migration and cultural exchange, including sustained interaction with Islam, which arrived in the region as early as the sixteenth century through trade and religious proselytization (Arlinah, 2018). In this context, Islam did not entirely replace pre-existing belief systems; rather, it engaged in a process of interaction, negotiation, and transformation within the framework of local culture. Kase Nae Tiang Alif stands as a concrete example of how the Makeang community merges Islamic teachings with local symbols through a ritual practice that is rich in layered meanings.

This ritual is performed during specific occasions deemed sacred, often related to communal thanksgiving, the commemoration of local histories, or religious events such as the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (Maulid). It involves the recitation of Qur'anic verses, the incorporation of Arabic script—specifically the hijaiyah letters—in the symbolism of the Tiang Alif, and the presentation of ritual foods. Interestingly, these religious components are accompanied by the ronggeng togal dance, traditional percussive music, and the active participation of women and youth in cultural performances. This combination generates a religious experience that is not monolithic, but rather dialogical, characterized by an interplay between sacredness and profane cultural expression.

This constellation raises important questions: how do the Makeang people interpret religious practices that blend sacred and profane elements? Are such practices perceived as violations of orthodoxy, or rather as contextual and inclusive expressions of faith? To address these questions, this study employs an anthropological approach to religion, focusing on syncretism and ritual symbolism. Syncretism is not understood here as a deviation from religious norms, but as a social and cultural process through which religious meanings are reconstituted within local contexts (Stewart, 1999). Within this framework, Kase Nae Tiang Alif can be interpreted as a site of cultural negotiation, where the Makeang community articulates its religious identity while simultaneously preserving its cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the Tiang Alif symbol, which lies at the center of this ritual, carries complex layers of meaning. Literally, Tiang Alif refers to the first letter of the Arabic alphabet, which in Islamic mystical traditions symbolizes the oneness of God. In the local context, the pole is made from bamboo or wood and adorned with white cloth, flowers, and other materials regarded as sacred. It is erected in an open space and serves as the focal point of the ritual procession. Beyond its theological significance, the pole also functions as a cultural marker—connecting the community to ancestral histories, sacred geography, and collective solidarity.

The incorporation of *ronggeng* dance into this ritual further illustrates how local cultural elements are not merely decorative, but play an essential role in shaping atmosphere, conveying meaning, and fostering communal unity. In many orthodox Islamic traditions, dance—particularly when involving women—is often perceived as incompatible with ideals of piety. However, within the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual, this performative element is seamlessly integrated into the ritual structure without generating significant internal conflict. This suggests that the Makeang community possesses its own cultural logic for interpreting sacredness, one that does not always align with mainstream normative Islamic perspectives.

The social context of the Makeang community—characterized by clan structures, genealogical networks, and strong ties to ancestral villages—also shapes the way this ritual is practiced. The participation of all segments of society—elders, youth, men, and women—renders the ritual not merely a religious event, but also a mechanism for reinforcing solidarity and reproducing collective identity. In this regard, Kase Nae Tiang Alif fulfills a broader social function beyond formal worship; it becomes a space for articulating the identity of the Makeang as a religious community deeply rooted in local cultural traditions.

Given this context, the present study is significant in enriching the discourse on local Islam and religious practices that do not always align linearly with formal doctrines. It also contributes to a deeper understanding of how communities in maritime and multicultural regions such as North Halmahera construct the relationship between religion and culture through dynamic and evolving rituals. In a global climate where religious identity is increasingly drawn toward purification and conservatism, examining practices such as Kase Nae Tiang Alif offers a space for critical reflection on the importance of openness and negotiation in religious life.

The primary objective of this article is to explore Kase Nae Tiang Alif as a form of negotiation between the sacred and the profane within the context of local Islam as practiced by the Makeang community. This study also seeks to demonstrate that ritual is not a fixed or static entity, but rather a dynamic field of contested meanings that responds to and reflects broader social change. This study aims to provide insight into how Muslim communities in peripheral regions creatively construct their own ways of understanding and practicing Islam.

2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach with ethnographic methods to examine religious practices as integral to the community's everyday life. This approach was chosen because the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual encompasses not only theological aspects, but also cultural symbols, historical narratives, social relations, and complex forms of collective performance. Accordingly, the researcher's direct engagement in the field was essential for understanding how the Makeang people negotiate the boundaries between the sacred and the profane within the framework of local Islam.

Fieldwork was conducted in Ngofabobawa Village, Malifut District, North Maluku Province, which serves as a primary settlement for the Makeang people who migrated from Makian Island. The site was purposively selected because the ritual is still performed in its entirety and involves various elements of the community. The data presented in this article are drawn from research carried out between March and June 2016, with additional visits between 2017 and 2019, including mid-2017, which coincided with several local ceremonies. The researcher's presence during these events enabled direct observation of ritual sequences, community participation, and the symbolic dynamics that unfolded.

There 23 informants participated in this study, consisting of 10 *hakim syara* who also served as mosque administrators, five community leaders, including village officials and elders, and eight lay villagers comprising women who prepared offerings, youth who organized the togal tent, musicians, and participants in the *togal* dance.

Data collection combined participant observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were conducted in the mosque where the Tiang Alif was erected, as well as in the house where the pole was stored and where the *tahlil* ritual was performed over seven nights. We observed preparations for the storage house, the recitation of *tahlil*, the erection of the Tiang Alif on the mosque roof in the morning, and the performance of *togal ronggeng* in the evening following the installation.

The data collected from observations and interviews were analyzed using a thematic and interpretative approach. All field notes and interview transcripts were carefully read and coded to identify recurring patterns, symbolic meanings, and social interactions related to the ritual process. Themes were then categorized into three analytical domains: (1) the structure and stages of the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual, (2) the negotiation between sacred and profane elements, and (3) the sociocultural functions of the ritual in maintaining communal identity. The analytical process involved iterative interpretation, where field data were continuously compared with theoretical concepts of syncretism, local Islam, and ritual symbolism. The researcher also employed reflexive analysis, acknowledging her positionality as both an observer and participant within the ritual space. This reflexive stance allowed for a deeper understanding of the emic (insider) perspectives of the Makeang people while maintaining etic (analytical) distance in interpreting the meanings embedded in the ritual. Through this multi-

layered analytical approach, the study reveals how the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual functions as a dynamic site of meaning-making—where theological, ecological, and cultural dimensions are continuously negotiated in the lived religious experience of the Makeang community.

Research ethics were upheld by securing informed consent from all informants. Consent were given for participating, interviewing, recording during interviews, and using their real names. We also respect cultural sensitivities in discussing religious and customary matters.

3. Result and Discussion

- **The Kase Nae Tiang Alif**

The Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual represents a sacred stage in the construction of a mosque, blending Islamic religious practices with local customary heritage in North Maluku. Literally translated as "raising the alif pole," Kase Nae Tiang Alif refers to the installation of a central pillar—often called the king post—positioned at the heart of the mosque structure, serving as the main support between the walls and the roof. Yet beyond its architectural function, the pole is imbued with symbolic meaning as a vertical axis connecting humans to the transcendent—a cosmological center affirming the presence of the Divine within the social and spiritual space of the community. In religious symbolism, the pole can be understood as an axis mundi—the world axis marking the sacred center of the universe within the space of worship (Turner, 1995).

This ritual is widely recognized among communities in North Maluku, although not all mosque constructions include its performance. Kase Nae Tiang Alif is more commonly practiced in mosques that maintain strong ties to local traditions and village-based kinship systems. Based on management patterns, mosques in North Maluku can generally be classified into four main categories: (1) customary mosques, administered by the sultanate or royal institutions; (2) village mosques or prayer halls (*mushallah*), managed by local communities or delegated to customary authorities through the role of the *hakim syara* (Islamic legal guardian); (3) organizational mosques, under the authority of modern religious institutions such as Muhammadiyah; and (4) *langgar*, small prayer houses typically used by women worshippers. Among these four types, only customary mosques and village mosques continue to include the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual as part of their construction process.

In village mosques, the performance of the ritual depends on the collective decision of the community or the directive of the *hakim syara*, who functions as a guardian of both moral order and local Islamic tradition. This illustrates that religion in this context is not merely practiced as a theological system but enacted through social consensus that takes into account cultural values and customary relational structures. Following Geertz's (1960b) perspective, religion here is not solely a belief system, but also a "system of meaning" embedded in symbolic actions and deeply rooted in the community's social structure.

Interestingly, the Kase Nae Tiang Alif procession bears similarities to the installation of the central post (*tiang raja*) in the construction of a traditional house. Both begin with the crafting of the pillar, followed by prayers led by an imam or customary leader, and are accompanied by *tahlilan*—Islamic communal recitations—held on the evening and morning before the post is erected. However, significant differences emerge in the manner of execution. While the post installation for a house is typically modest and confined to the family or close kin, the raising of the Tiang Alif for a mosque is grander, more public, and involves multiple villages. This reflects the performative dimension of religious ritual, which transcends individual or domestic domains and instead takes on a collective and public character. The emotional tone also differs: the mosque context evokes reverence, solemnity, and communal pride, strengthening inter-village solidarity.

The ritual unfolds through several important stages, each carrying its own symbolic meaning. The *first* is the deliberation stage, during which community members and customary leaders convene to determine the timing and form of the ritual. This stage serves as a moment of communal value consolidation, binding the community in a shared spiritual intention to construct a sacred space of worship. The *second* stage involves the search for the tree, a process that cannot be conducted arbitrarily. The tree to be used as the Tiang Alif must be selected from a specific location considered spiritually and ecologically "clean." This search typically includes prayers, observation of natural signs, and informal consultations with customary elders or *modhim* (ritual specialists) who possess an intuitive understanding of the "language of the forest." The *third* stage is the cutting of the tree and the making of the pillar, marking the transition of the tree from a natural object into a ritual artifact. The timber, which previously grew wild in the forest, is transported into the social sphere and symbolically prepared to serve as the spiritual center of the mosque. Before being erected, the pillar undergoes a cooling period, during which it is kept in a designated place, guarded, and recited over with prayers. This process can be understood as a liminal phase, following Turner's (1969) concept, where the pillar is no longer an ordinary tree, but has not yet fully become a spiritual symbol. It dwells between two worlds: the natural and the sacred.

The *culmination* of the entire ritual sequence is the erection of the pillar. At this moment, the community gathers, traditional music is played, and communal prayers are offered before the Tiang Alif is raised at the center of the mosque's foundation. Many participants describe this as a moment of "spiritual resonance"—a profound sense of connection between the community, the divine, and their ancestors. Not only men, but also women and children are present, reflecting the inclusive nature of the ritual. From the perspective of religion as social practice, this is a moment of collective identity articulation, in which the community is not merely constructing a physical building, but also reaffirming its spiritual and cultural foundations.

This stage reveals that Kase Nae Tiang Alif does not merely possess a religious dimension in the normative or doctrinal sense, but is also rich in symbolism and

embedded in locally negotiated values. The practice demonstrates how the Makeang community constructs their religiosity in a reflective and dialogical manner—merging Islamic texts with the social and cultural contexts in which they live. Thus, this ritual is not simply a supplementary feature in mosque construction, but rather an embodiment of local Islam—a living, evolving tradition that is continuously renewed through meaningful social practice.

- **The Transformation of the Pillar as a Communal Sacred Process**

The Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual does not emerge as an individual initiative, but rather as the outcome of a socially embedded process grounded in collective deliberation. While the initial idea may originate from a particular individual, its execution must pass through a stage known as *bacarita*—an informal communal dialogue—followed by an official agreement (*permufakatan*) led by the village head and the mosque *imam*. In this forum, community members gather to reach consensus on both the technical and symbolic aspects of the ritual, including the timing, division of labor, and shared financial responsibilities. As an elder, Ahmad Yasin, explained that: "We never decide this alone. The mosque belongs to everyone, so the ritual must also come from everyone's heart. If only one person insists, it will bring imbalance."

This process reflects Clifford Geertz's view of religion as not merely a symbolic system, but one that is deeply structured within the social and economic fabric of the communities who practice it. The *permufakatan* thus becomes a space where religious values are socially negotiated, positioning the community not merely as passive recipients of ritual, but as active agents who co-construct the meaning and structure of the practice. A *hakim syara*, H. Abdullah, emphasized that: "Our duty is not just about leading prayers, but also ensuring that the process is *halal* and *berkah*. The Tiang Alif is not only wood—it must be clean, chosen with prayer, not bought with money."

Following the consensus meeting, the next stage is the selection of the tree that will be transformed into the Tiang Alif. Not everyone is permitted to undertake this task. The deliberation process typically results in the nomination of individuals considered to possess deep local knowledge regarding the signs of a proper tree—one that is perfectly upright, has a strong and durable trunk, and typically comes from native hardwood species such as forest teak (*jati*) or jackfruit trees. This selection process carries significant spiritual dimensions, as it is strictly forbidden to use pre-cut timber purchased from markets. Buying a ready-made pillar is seen as diminishing the spiritual value of the ritual. The emphasis on selecting a tree from the surrounding environment—chosen rather than bought—reflects a sacralization of what would otherwise be considered profane or mundane objects. A carpenter, Pak Hasan, who was entrusted to cut down the tree for the *Tiang Alif*, explained, as follows:

> Sure, we could buy a pole from a hardware store, but the best one comes from the forest—carefully selected with reverence. That's why we begin the prayer ritual from the moment the tree is felled, so that blessings may accompany it throughout the process.

Within Koentjaraningrat's (1985) theoretical framework, this can be understood as the process of sacralizing the ordinary. Natural objects such as trees undergo a transformation in their ontological status through the community's religious system of meaning. They are no longer just trees—they become vessels of the sacred, embedded in a collective cosmology that binds nature, society, and the divine.

If the tree deemed suitable is found within someone's private garden or land, the owner is approached for permission to donate it. Economic transactions rarely occur in such cases; instead, voluntary offerings of the tree are believed to bring multiplied blessings and spiritual merit from God. Pak Yasin, a landowner who once donated his tree, expressed that: "If the tree becomes part of the mosque, I feel proud. It's like a part of me is standing there in prayer every day." This belief underscores the idea that spiritual acts are not necessarily driven by material calculation, but rather by a system of transcendental reciprocity that binds humans to the divine. In this context, the relationship between humans and trees is not merely ecological, but also ethical and spiritual. The act of giving is situated within a moral economy in which generosity is viewed as an act of devotion, and natural resources are not commodified but sacralized. This reinforces the idea that religious practice in the Makeang community is deeply intertwined with local cosmologies that frame nature as both a resource and a spiritual partner.

The tree-cutting stage is carried out on a date determined by the mosque's *imam*, usually a day after the appearance of the new moon. This reliance on the lunar calendar reflects the integration of local Islamic cosmology into the ritual timing. Pak Hasan explained that cutting the tree during the new moon is considered the most appropriate time because the tree's water content is at its lowest, ensuring that the resulting pillar will be more durable. The procession begins with a *tahlil* prayer led by the *imam*, followed by a group of approximately 30 men who accompany the journey to the tree site located around 10 kilometers from the village. A woman also participates, tasked with preparing food and ritual offerings, demonstrating that although men dominate the public dimensions of the ritual, women hold significant roles in supporting its symbolic and logistical aspects. This gendered participation highlights the communal nature of the ritual, where both spiritual authority and practical care are shared responsibilities, reinforcing the holistic integration of social roles in religious practice.

Upon arrival at the designated tree sites, the atmosphere shifts into a sacred mode. The *imam*, dressed in a long Middle Eastern-style robe, begins reciting Arabic prayers while circumambulating the tree three times, repeatedly chanting the *dhikr*: *Laa Ilaha Illallah, Baruhu Allah, hu*. This process is known locally as *tawaf zuhud*, a form of reverence paid to the tree before it is felled. "The tree is a living being. We need to ask its permission, show it respect, and only when it "allows" us to do we begin cutting. If the prayer is skipped, the work becomes difficult, and the saw might break," said *imam syara*.

A cone-shaped yellow rice offering (*nasi kuning*) with an egg placed at its summit is set beneath the tree, along with incense and *kemenyan* (benzoin resin). These offerings are not merely ritual objects, but they are understood as the tree's "final feast"—a symbolic gesture meant to ensure the tree's willingness to be cut down.

From the standpoint of modern rationalism, feeding a tree before using it as a mosque pillar may appear illogical. However, for the Makeang community, meaning is not derived from reason alone, but from faith and reverence for the spiritual relationship between humans and nature. This ritual affirms Geertz's (1966) argument that religious symbols do not stand in isolation, but are deeply embedded in the emotional structures and cosmological frameworks of a society.

The cutting process is carried out by the chief carpenter using a mechanical saw. Once felled, the tree is roughly hewn into a rectangular shape and then transported back to the village through a collective procession. This phase closely resembles a funeral procession: the timber is wrapped in white cloth, tied securely at both ends, sprinkled with pandan leaves, and carried while participants chant *Laa Ilaha Illallah* in unison. The symbolism of death is strongly evoked in this ritual act. The pillar is not perceived merely as timber, but is ritually framed as a "corpse" being ceremonially laid to rest—not in a literal sense, but as a symbolic transition from the realm of nature to the sacred domain. Pak Ibrahim, a villager who took part in carrying the wood from the forest to the house, described as follows:

> When we carried the wood, it felt like carrying a body. We recited *dhikr* as if we are at a funeral. At that moment, it felt—it's not dead, but being "reborn" for the mosque. There was a kind of spirit within us as we carried the wood, making the long distance from the forest to the village, it feel easy to walk.

This transformation illustrates how local cosmology infuses material objects with spiritual significance, highlighting a communal understanding of death as a passage, not an end.

For the next seven days, the timber is laid in repose at the house of the master carpenter for a phase referred to as "cooling." During this period, the pole is placed on a long table draped in white cloth and lined with pandan leaves. Surrounding it, the *imam* and *hakim Syara* (Islamic judges) recite daily prayers, repeating the same liturgical phrases. This stage represents a liminal phase, as conceptualized by Turner (1969): the pole has exited the profane realm (the forest), yet it has not fully entered the sacred domain of the mosque. It stands suspended between two worlds—nature and sanctity—in a transformative process toward attaining full spiritual status. The ritual cooling underscores the community's commitment to preparing the object not merely in physical terms, but as a meaningful sacred presence within the social-religious cosmos. Ibu Maryam, a villager who often joins the nightly prayers, stated that: "Every night we come to recite *tahlil*. Everyone who gathers prays for the ritual to go smoothly. We pray for the pillar to be pure and strong. We women, besides cooking for those who join the *tahlil*, also take part in the prayers."

The climax of the entire ritual series is the pole-raising procession. The ceremony begins at night, following the Isya prayer, with *hakim syara* (Islamic legal authorities) leading an all-night *tahlil* (ritual recitation) that continues until dawn. On the following morning, just before sunrise, the villagers gather, dressed predominantly in white—men and women, young and old—yet occupying different spatial positions based on social status. Those not part of the customary authority structure or unrelated to the *hakim syara* family stand along the periphery, signaling a symbolic hierarchy embedded within the ritual space. When the pole is finally lifted, approximately 60 women clad in white form a ceremonial line in front of the master carpenter's house. They play a critical role in the "handover" of the pole to the line of men, who then carry it in procession toward the mosque. Many participants reach out to briefly touch the pole, believing it to be a conduit for blessing (barakah), and some are visibly moved to tears. This performative moment, infused with emotion and spiritual intensity, illustrates the inclusive yet stratified nature of religious experience within the Makeang community.

Upon arrival at the mosque, the pole is erected vertically from the ground to the center of the roof by a group of skilled carpenters, using ropes to hoist it into place. The *imam* and *hakim syara* stand atop the roof, accompanying the process with prayers and *dhikr* (remembrance of God). Once the pole is successfully positioned, the *adhan* (call to prayer) is proclaimed from the rooftop, marking the culmination of this sacred rite. The emotional intensity reaches its peak—people embrace, some weep, and others offer silent prayers—signifying not only the completion of a communal endeavor but also the reaffirmation of spiritual and social bonds. The entire event concludes with a communal feast (*jamuan makan*), symbolizing the restoration and celebration of social harmony following the completion of the ritual.

Anthropologically, the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual illustrates that religious practice functions not only as a vehicle for spiritual devotion, but also as a site for articulating identity, solidarity, and the negotiation of values between the sacred and the profane. Rather than drawing a binary division between the two realms, the ritual interweaves them into a cohesive and dynamic symbolic system. As Turner (1995) and Geertz (1960b) have argued, ritual does not merely reflect existing values—it also actively reshapes them within particular spatial and temporal contexts. In the case of the Makeang community, Kase Nae Tiang Alif serves as a vibrant expression of local Islam—an Islam that is open, reflective, and deeply embedded in the surrounding social structures and ecological environment.

- ***Togal Ronggeng* and the Sacred–Profane Dialectic in Local Islamic Ritual**

Amid the sacred atmosphere surrounding the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual, the night before the installation of the central pillar is marked by a seemingly profane performance: *togal ronggeng*. This folk performance, long recognized by the Makeang community, traditionally serves as the culminating festivity following collective labor during ceremonial events. It combines elements of music,

rhymed poetry (*pantun*), and mass dancing. Its presence signals a transition from solemn ritual space to an open, inclusive social celebration. As Ibu Iam, a village elder, explained, "Without *ronggeng,* the ritual feels incomplete. It is our way of expressing gratitude before and after the Tiang Alif stands. Among the Makeang people, every ritual must include *togal*—it is part of who we are."

Historically and ethnographically, *togal* is a form of poetic performance accompanied by traditional musical instruments such as the *tifa, fiol* (a type of fiddle), and *gambus* (a plucked string instrument). The term togal in the Makeang language literally means "to pull" or "to draw," referring to the plucking technique used in playing string instruments. However, in actual performance, *togal* is considered incomplete without the presence of *ronggeng.* Here, *ronggeng* is not merely a supporting dance, but an integral part of the performance's structure.

The uniqueness of *ronggeng* in Makeang lies in its communal and non-commercial nature. Unlike the *ronggeng* tradition in Java—which is often associated with professional female dancers and sometimes burdened with moral stigma—ronggeng in Makeang is opened to all members of the community, regardless of age or gender. The dance is performed in pairs, with relatively simple and repetitive movements, such as hand-turning, foot-stomping, and gestures of greeting through bodily motion. The movements known as *yora* (a body-bending movement performed by the *togal* dance leader) and *langse* (a movement involving the exchange of positions between men and women in the *togal* dance) enrich the physical dynamics that accompany the poetic verses and music, transforming the performance into a collective dance that is both joyful and meditative.

Interestingly, despite the fact that men and women participate and even hand-touching between men and women, this dance does not face rejection from local religious authorities. Figures such as the mosque *imam* or *hakim syara* are often seen joining the dance or granting permission for the performance of *togal ronggeng* in the mosque courtyard—right before the Tiang Alif is erected. This reflects how the Makeang community embraces a flexible and inclusive form of local Islam, open to diverse expressions of cultural life. Such a practice supports Geertz's (1960b) conception of religion as a system of symbols that is not monolithic, but rather continuously contextualized within local social and cultural practices (Geertz, 1960a).

Furthermore, the presence of *togal ronggeng* within the ritual context of mosque construction underscores a productive tension between the sacred and the profane. Following Victor Turner's (1969) perspective, this situation reflects a liminal space—a threshold moment in which the boundaries between the spiritual and the social become fluid. The *tahlilan* and *dhikr* as well as communal dancing and folk entertainment are performed simultaneously at the site where the Tiang Alif is laid (*diistirahatkan*) before it is bought to the mosque. They are not in mutual exclusion, but they are complementary elements. In this context, sacredness does not entail the elimination of worldly expressions; rather, it involves the active engagement of all dimensions of life within a unified ritual

performance. Irfan, a young participant, reflected that: "After days of work and prayers, the dance helps us release our tiredness. It's not against religion—it reminds us that faith can also make us feeling happy."

Within the framework of cultural hybridity, *togal ronggeng* also serves as a concrete example of the intersection between Malay-Islamic traditions, colonial influences, and local practices in North Maluku. The use of musical instruments such as the *rebab* (a traditional bowed musical instrument) and *gambus* (a traditional plucked musical instrument with a round body) reflects the musical heritage of Middle Eastern trade networks, while the format of mass dance and its social function are deeply rooted in the communal logic of coastal farming community. As Bhabha (2012) notes that in hybrid spaces, identity and meaning are not static, but they continuously negotiated through cultural practices.

Another dimension of *togal ronggeng* is its more fluid gender roles. The dance opens up space for women's participation—not only as dancers, but also as facilitators and poets. This contrasts with the male-dominated sacred stages of the *kase* ritual, yet it highlights a more egalitarian balance of roles as the ritual enters its social dimension. The presence of women in such public spaces signals the existence of a distinctive "politics of the body" within Makeang's local Islam—where piety and social expression are not seen as dichotomous, but rather as complementary elements in a shared collective atmosphere.

The appearance, clothing, and dress styles of the participants also serve as representations of class and identity. Traditional kebaya dresses, long-sleeved shirts, formal shoes, and hair buns (*konde*) become symbols of the community's readiness to present themselves in a public space that is both ritualistic and aesthetic. In this context, *togal ronggeng* is not merely a form of entertainment, but it is also a performative arena where community members display themselves as part of a living Muslim society—cultured, expressive, and open to diverse forms of social expression. According to Pak Yasin, a frequent participant in the *togal* dance, "The *ronggeng togal* attire must be modest, and the dance should never disturb others. Everyone must show mutual respect."

Thus, the presence of *togal ronggeng* in the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual underscores that sacredness is not exclusive but interwoven with the social and cultural practices of everyday life. This ritual demonstrates that the sacred and the profane are not opposing dichotomies, but rather two poles that are continuously negotiated within a dynamic social space. Makeang Islam is a form of Islam celebrated through musical rhythms, bodily movements, and poetic verses that entertain while simultaneously reinforcing communal solidarity.

In the anthropology of religion, syncretism is generally understood as the blending or integration of elements from different belief systems, resulting in new religious configurations (Leopold & Jensen, 2004; Morris, 2005). However, in the context of local Islam among the Makeang people in North Maluku, syncretism is not interpreted as the birth of a new religion. Instead, it is viewed as a process of cultural and ideological incorporation, in which elements from other belief systems are adopted into the dominant religious practice—namely

Islam—without fundamentally altering its religious identity. Within this framework, the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual can be seen as a concrete manifestation of such syncretism, wherein Islam as a formal religion engages and compromises with local cultural heritage, animist traditions, and symbolic systems rooted in Hindu-Buddhist influences and Austronesian cosmologies.

As outlined in the previous sections, the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual is an integral part of the mosque construction process, which is regarded as the spiritual center of the Makeang Muslim community. The mosque functions not only as a place of worship but is also symbolically positioned as a sacred space—a site of encounter between humans and the Divine. In the religious imagination of the Makeang people, the mosque is conceived as a vertical structure that connects the lower world (humankind) with the upper world (God). The Tiang Alif, as the main supporting pillar of the roof, is imbued with symbolic meaning as a spiritual connector that bridges these two realms.

The symbolism of the summit also holds a significant place in this ritual, as illustrated in the offering of yellow rice shaped like a mountain with an egg placed on top, the community embeds philosophical and cosmological meanings in this vertical representation: the peak is seen as the point of encounter with the Divine, while the egg symbolizes the origin of life. The mosque's structure—with its roof as the highest point—is likewise interpreted as the closest place to God. However, since humans cannot dwell at the summit or reside directly on the roof, a symbolic connector is required—namely the Tiang Alif—which, in this context, is sanctified through a series of elaborate and solemn rites.

The use of incense, aromatic resins, and offerings such as yellow rice and eggs reflects the adoption of ritual elements historically associated with Hindu-Buddhist traditions as well as local animistic beliefs. The rising smoke of incense is perceived as a spiritual medium that carries human prayers and hopes toward the transcendent realm. This phenomenon echoes Geertz's (1960a) notion of religion as a system of symbolic meaning, wherein local cultural elements are not merely incorporated functionally, but also imbued with deep emotional and spiritual significance. In this context, the presence of non-Islamic symbolic elements is not regarded as deviant, but rather as a cultural strategy to mediate the human relationship with the Divine.

From the perspective of puritan Islam, the use of symbolic connectors such as incense, aromatic resins, or even sacralized objects like ritual poles is often regarded as *bid'ah*—a deviation from the pure doctrine of tawhid. However, within the framework of Makeang's local Islam, such practices are viewed as legitimate forms of *taqarrub* (spiritual approach) to the Divine. Spirituality here is not confined to formal religious teachings, but it is open to symbolic expressions which is believed to strengthen the human relationship with transcendental power. This view aligns with the notion that religion in local practice is a site of social and symbolic negotiation, rather than a fixed reflection of theological dogma. In multicultural societies, religious practice functions as a dynamic arena in which identity, norms, and symbols are continuously

negotiated by the community, ensuring that religion remains relevant and contextually embedded in everyday life (Eriksen, 2020).

In this context, the *hakim syara* (Islamic legal elders) play a crucial role. They do not merely function as ritual leaders, but they also serve as spiritual mediators who translate the will of God to humans and vice versa. Their role parallels that of Hermes in Greek mythology—a messenger between the divine realm and the human world. Their presence legitimizes the symbolic structure of the ritual while simultaneously reinforcing their authority within the community's social order. As Turner (1969) explains, ritual leaders in traditional societies are not only facilitators of symbolic transitions, but they also wield power in managing crises and reinforcing social cohesion.

From the perspective of cultural hybridity theory, such syncretic practices illustrate how the Makeang community constructs their Islamic religiosity through an ongoing process of negotiation between normative Islamic values and the dynamic realities of local culture. As Bhabha (1994) argues, hybridity constitutes a "third space"—a site where new meanings are created, not entirely derived from either dominant or subordinate structures, but emerging from the interaction between the two. In the context of Kase Nae Tiang Alif, the *tiang* (pillar) functions not merely as a physical structure, but also as a site of meaning—a symbolic space where values, symbols, and spirituality are collectively negotiated.

Thus, the syncretic practices embedded in this ritual should not be viewed as deviations from orthodoxy, but rather as manifestations of Islam that is contextual, dialogical, and deeply rooted in the local cosmology of the Makeang people. In this form of localized Islam, the sacred is not exclusive, but inclusive—embracing symbols and practices that strengthen the sense of connectedness between humans, nature, and the divine. The Tiang Alif is not merely a wooden pole supporting the mosque's roof; it is a symbol of spiritual connection grounded in the community's cultural and religious experience.

- **Negotiating Islam, Culture, and Identity in the Kase Nae Tiang Alif Ritual**

In the end, it can be said that the form of local Islam practiced by the Makeang community through the Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual is not merely an adaptation of normative Islamic doctrines, but rather the result of a long process of negotiation between belief systems, social structures, and continuously evolving cultural dynamics.

These findings reinforce the theoretical perspective that religion cannot be separated from the local contexts in which it is embedded. Concepts such as religious hybridity (Bhabha, 2012), the dialectic between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 1915; Turner, 1995), and religion as a system of symbols (Geertz, 1960a) find concrete expression in the ritual practice of Kase Nae Tiang Alif. This ritual embodies the symbolic richness and emotional depth of local religiosity, where sacredness is not isolated from the profane, but rather

negotiated through community participation, sensory expressions, and symbolic performances.

In this context, Islam functions not only as a religious framework, but it also as a cultural language through which identity, collective memory, and social authority are expressed. The incorporation of music, dance, and symbolic offerings in the mosque construction process demonstrates that local forms of piety are not entirely constrained by orthodox boundaries. Instead, they reflect the continuity of faith through embodied and contextually grounded cultural expressions. This supports the argument that Islam in Eastern Indonesia is best understood as a plural practice shaped by historical intersections and local cultural dynamics.

Practically, the findings of this study can serve as a reference for efforts to preserve local traditions that intersect with religious values. In the context of education and community empowerment, the documentation and analysis of this ritual can inform the development of curricula based on local knowledge, foster intergenerational dialogue, and strengthen the cultural identity of the Makeang community. Furthermore, these findings are also relevant to discourses on community-based development, where cultural and spiritual dimensions are often marginalized in policy planning.

4. Conclusion

The Kase Nae Tiang Alif ritual practiced by the Makeang community is not merely a representation of sacred religious practice, but it is also a reflection of the complex social, cultural, and symbolic dynamics embedded in local Islam in North Maluku. In its execution, this rite is not solely understood as a process of mosque construction, but rather as a vehicle for strengthening communal solidarity, maintaining ecological relationships with the surrounding environment, and negotiating the position of human beings within their spiritual cosmology.

The ritual stages starts from communal deliberation, tree selection, felling, consecration, to the erection of the sacred pillar—it becomes evident how the community constructs the Tiang Alif as a sacred axis connecting the human world below with the divine realm above. This process of sacralizing a natural object demonstrates that the community's belief system is not solely grounded in formal religious doctrine, but is shaped through deeply embedded symbolic practices within everyday life, as articulated in the theoretical frameworks of Clifford Geertz (1960a) and Koentjaraningrat (1985).

The presence of *togal ronggeng* as a performative entertainment within the ritual space also illustrates a productive negotiation between the sacred and the profane. In the spirit of Turner's (1995) concept of liminality, the mass dance and Malay-inflected poetic chants are not seen as violations of sacredness, but it is rather as collective emotional expressions that enhance the communal dimension of spirituality. At this juncture, Makeang Islam emerges as a flexible form of

Islam—one that is marked by compromise and openness toward diverse modes of cultural expression.

Furthermore, the findings of this article affirm that syncretism is not merely a random amalgamation of cultural or religious elements, but rather the result of historical and social processes that are continuously negotiated. Islam in Makeang is not a puritanical form of Islam, but a hybrid one—celebrated through dance, prayer, symbols, and communal cooperation. Ultimately, this ritual becomes a vital arena in which the community asserts its identity, strengthens social cohesion, and celebrates faith within a plural and dynamic cultural landscape.

Future studies and community programs should focus on documenting and revitalizing such localized religious practices as cultural heritage, not merely as relics of the past, but as living traditions that embody harmony between faith, culture, and nature. Incorporating these practices into educational curricula and local cultural policies may also foster greater appreciation for Indonesia's religious diversity and strengthen intergenerational continuity of indigenous Islamic expressions.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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