

BEING “HINDU” WITHOUT BEING HINDUIZED: THE INDIGENOUS NUAULU IN MALUKU

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Abstract

Fearing discrimination from the Indonesian government, the Nuauulu tribe in Central Maluku have chosen to declare themselves as “Hindu”. Their ancestral customs are similar to mainstream Hindu beliefs and traditions. However, they lack the Hindu Gods, the Sanskrit mantras and the unifying scripture of the Vedas. What is left is a local indigenous religion. However, their bad experience with being categorized as an ancestral faith (aliran kepercayaan) has led them to be self-declared Hindus. In such a circumstance, Hinduism can either unconditionally accept them despite the lack of evident resemblance, or the Nuauulu tribe can alter their religion’s façade to duplicate crucial Hindu identifiers. This paper questions what it means to be a Hindu, what Hinduization is, and how discriminatory definitions torment indigenous religions.

Keywords: indigenous religions; Indonesian Studies; cultural studies; anthropology of religion; ethnography

Abstrak

Menghindari diskriminasi dari pemerintah Indonesia, suku Nuauulu di Maluku Tengah memilih untuk menyatakan diri mereka sebagai “Hindu”. Adat istiadat warisan leluhur mereka mirip dengan kepercayaan dan tradisi Hindu pada umumnya. Namun, mereka tidak memiliki dewa- dewi Hindu, mantra-mantra Sansekerta ataupun kitab suci pemersatu Weda. Yang tersisa adalah agama asli setempat. Namun, pengalaman buruk mereka dengan dikategorikan sebagai kepercayaan lokal telah mendorong mereka untuk mendeklarasikan diri sebagai penganut Hindu. Menghadapi kasus seperti ini, agama Hindu bisa saja menerima mereka tanpa syarat meskipun tanpa kemiripan yang jelas, atau suku Nuauulu dapat mengubah wajah agama mereka untuk menggabungkan ciri-ciri penting agama Hindu. Makalah ini mempertanyakan apa yang dimaksud dengan menjadi seorang Hindu, apa itu Hinduisasi, dan bagaimana agama-agama asli menderita karena definisi yang diskriminatif.

Kata Kunci: agama-agama adat; kajian Indonesia; kajian budaya; antropologi agama; etnografi

INTRODUCTION

*Upakuanahatana parakati tunumunie amanaku sana, sana nea oiso siruhena auneni
aurana runaku na wepatane mirike rotutu ria supan.*

*O God, I am sorry. Please remove my obstacles.
Give me health so that I may be healthy.*

-Nuaulu invocation-

“We have been following Hinduism long before Islam and Christianity on this island. People who do not understand them claim that we are just an ancestral faith.” Esin, a religious counsellor to the Indonesian Hindu Dharma Council and the Civil Registration Agency, stated. The self-declared Hindus native to Central Maluku continue to struggle for acceptance. The religious landscape of Indonesia is under the watchful eye of the State, with six official religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism, that must assert a monotheistic theology and complete themselves with definite doctrines and practices. Notwithstanding what they choose to call themselves, an analysis of their indigenous religion, as delineated in this paper, provides evidence that what they claim to be Hindu is indeed nothing but a local ancestral religion.

For the sake of government recognition, they have enforced a Hindu identity on themselves. Although the central government recognizes Indigenous religions, much stigma surrounds being a “*penghayat kepercayaan*” or adherent of a faith. This paper provides first-hand accounts of discrimination that the tribe patently refuses. This research took place on Seram Island, in Amahai District, in November of 2022. The Nuaulu tribe is the largest Hindu group on the Island, and their practices are unique from those of other Hindus in the vicinity, such as Buru and Tanimbar.

RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers have relied on the information from their key informants, which include village elders and chiefs such as Sukardi Rianto, Zulkifli Kamama (Simalouw), Sakamahu Hury (Bonara), Marwai Leipary (Latan) and Kaisa Leipary (Runnusa). Special mention goes to Esin Peirissa, Hitinesi Nahatue, Nauniku Sounawe, and King Sahune Matoke, who allowed the research team to connect with the tribe and even provided additional data after the fieldwork ended. This research utilizes a qualitative method, the Induction Model 2 theory and ethnographic methods.

This paper concludes with suggestions for the tribe’s inclusion into Hinduism. Two possibilities are offered. Either Indonesian Hinduism faces scrutiny for accepting indigenous faiths that bear no resemblance to Hinduism. Alternatively, the Nuaulu would have to be Hinduized, i.e. link their concept of God with a Vedic deity, accept the Veda and its Sanskrit mantras, and establish a class of priests synonymous with the *brāhmaṇas*. Both options bear their consequences. If the Nuaulu would, however, accept Hinduization, it would most definitely modify their rituals and chants, altering their ancestral faith and going against their initial intentions. This complicated situation is due to the tribe’s fear of institutional discrimination towards indigenous religions. To declare to be an ancestral faith would logically be the best option. However, the discrimination and injustice they have endured deter them.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Institutional Discrimination Faced

Many are still convinced that the Nuaulus do not have a religion, with no God, and thus receive little to no recognition from the God-fearing State. Devoid of a “non-religious” option, The

Indonesian Constitutional Court has issued Stipulation No. 97/PUU-XIV/2016 in which such people are labelled as “Adherents of Faith”. This is simply the “other” option that one can choose on their civil documents. However, a growing number of indigenous Indonesian religions are occupying this label to seek recognition gradually. The Nuaulu tribe, however, do not want to belong to this broad category of faith but claims to have always chosen Hinduism as their official religion. “We have been following Hinduism since this tribe has known religion, and there have never been any problems. It has been safe all this time,” said Marwai Leipary. Many, however, are not convinced of this status, as the Nuaulu do not appear to know much of Hinduism, have no proper temples, and are devoid of access to the Veda. Kaisa Leipary, chief of Runnusa Hamlet, tells us of a mass marriage in 2019 wherein the civil authority questioned couples about their Hindu religion upon registering for their marriage certificates. People doubt the “Hindu-ness” of the Nuaulu as their religion depends entirely on inherited customs.

For Marwai and other informants, becoming a Hindu is not a difficult choice. Although there are still some problems regarding bureaucracy and religious education, they feel very comfortable culturally and spiritually. “Hinduism is an early religion in Indonesia that is in line with the tradition of the Nuaulu tribe. It is very close to the universe and believes in the existence of ancestors,” said King Matoke. Esin admitted that being a Hindu is not difficult as uniform obligations and ceremonies do not bind it. Esin adds that Hinduism provides freedom for them to continue to practise their ancestral teachings and values. The same sentiment is echoed by the Hindus of Tolotang in Sidrap and the Hindus of Aluk Todolo in Tana Toraja, both in South Sulawesi. Ever since 1969, they have chosen to be Hindu to conserve their ancestral customs, even though they are aware of the stark difference in the Hinduism of the Balinese (Darmapoetra, 2016). According to the study of Segara et al. (2019), the Hindu Alukta of Tana Toraja still faces discrimination from other tribe members who have chosen another world religion on their national identity cards. Nonetheless, to many, Hinduism is the best religion to opt for as it facilitates their indigenous belief system without much compromise. Indigenous forms of Indonesian Hinduism include the Hindu Tolotang (South Sulawesi), Hindu Alukta Tana Toraja (South Sulawesi), Hindu Kaharingan (Central Kalimantan) and Hindu Karo (North Sumatra).

Utami (2015) tells us in her study that the Nuaulu never doubted their religious adherence. However, stigma still comes from the civil authorities that question their religiosity. Such questions usually arise when processing official documents such as certificates and ID cards. Many are thus labelled as “Adherents of Faith” and not permitted to choose Hinduism on their official documents. Some have also opted to declare themselves as Christians or Muslims but refused to claim such official religions as they still practise their tribal faith. Indonesia recognizes only six official religions, and each must abide by a template of religious belief and practice as defined by the State. Not knowing one’s holy book, ritual, or holidays is unacceptable.

The tribespeople, such as Chief Kaisa Leipary, are eager to ensure that the 42 families that call Runnusa home can maintain their Hindu identity. With the aid of the local Indonesian Hindu Dharma Council, they have maintained their Hindu identity. Esin and other locals, however, are still doubtful about whether they can convince the tribe as some are leaning toward identifying themselves as adherents of faith instead of as Hindu, heeding the advice of government officials. A 2016 study by A. Muchaddam Fahham from the Indonesian House of Representatives’s research team similarly concluded that the Nuaulu are indeed an indigenous faith (2016: 32).

Lack of Historical “Hindu” Links

Seram is the largest and main island of the Maluku province, located in the Malukan archipelago in East Indonesia. They are Melanesians, much like other countries in Oceania, differing vastly from the ethnic majority of Java-centric Indonesia. There is history

of them trading with the Javanese Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit kingdom in the fourteenth century. In 1350 CE, Hayam Wuruk became the king of the empire, and the *Deśavarṇana* of Mpu Prapanca glorifies the extent of the kingdom (Mulyana, 2006: 4-5; Winaya, 2015: 97). This manuscript mentions that Maluku, Banda, Gorom, Seram and Ambon are part of the Majapahit empire (Pattikayhatu, 2012: 4) and the spices of the region, such as cloves and nutmeg, were a prized commodity in their trade (Tanudirjo, 2013: 1). It might have been due to the Majapahit influence that contemporary Nuaulus are confident that their religion is indeed Hindu. Shortly after, however, Islam arrived in North Maluku with Arab traders in the thirteenth century and established a foothold across much of the Indonesian archipelago with the Sultanate of Ternate in 1257 CE (Amira, 2021). The claim by the Nuaulu that Hinduism was the first religion they have been in contact with can indeed be factual. However, there is no evidence of any Śaivite nor Buddhist remnants of ritual or belief in their contemporary belief system.

The Nuaulu's religion, also known as Naurus, might have been exposed to Hinduism not from the vessels of the Javanese kingdoms, but perhaps from their Northern neighbour, the Philippines. The island of Mindanao, home to the Butuan kingdom, might have interacted with the Nuaulu, exposing them to Indian ideas. According to Song Chinese texts, Butuan were in trade as early as 1001 CE. (Wade, 2009) We also know that Sanskrit was used by the Rajahnate of Butuan, making it a likely source of some sort of Sanskritization. (Baldoza, 2022) It is indeed plausible that Butuan might have been in contact with the Maluku islands, as they were actively in trade with China, Viet, India and Sumatra. Sanskrit words used in the ancient Filipino kingdoms were terms for morality, law, emotion, planets, vegetation, honorific titles, money, and above all, deities. In Panyupayana, the Indic name of the Philippines, we also had the worship of Śakti, the divine feminine along with female Boddhisattvas. Along with deities of these feminine divinities, ornamental nāgas and garuḍas were also found in Butuan and Surigao. (Santarita, 2018: 98-100) However, to find the link between the Seram island and the islands of South Panyupayana, further study must be done. As we have noted, it was hard to find traces of Sanskrit terms in use by the Nuaulu. Despite the lack of evidence, Butuan is a likely partner in trade for the Nuaulu when considering its proximity and influence. To attribute it as the source of the Nuaulu's contact with Hinduism, however, cannot be confirmed at this stage.

Moreover, the claim is that "Hindu" is how they have always known their religion. The term "Hindu", however, was coined by the Persians. The Sindhu River region was called *Hidūś* after the Achaemenid conquest circa 500 BCE (Sen, 1999). Thus, the Majapahit would not call themselves Hindu. Instead, the fourteenth-century Kakawin Sutasoma refers to the state religions as Jina (Buddhism) and Śiwa. It would be the Europeans who later introduced the word "Hindu" and used it to imply the phenomena of Vedic religion. In 1820, John Crawfurd used the word "Hindu" to describe the religion of Bali in an article published in the *Asiatick Researches* (Calcutta). According to Lorenzen (1999), it was Rammohan Roy who first used the terms "Hindoo" and "Hindu" in his 1816 and 1817 articles before the widespread use in the 1839 publication of Alexander Duff, entitled "*India Missions: Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism Both in Theory and Practice*". The first contact the inhabitants of Seram would have with the Europeans would be with the Portuguese in 1512 (Cortese, 1944), who had previously been in contact with India and her religious landscape. In 1599, the Dutch arrived and established the Dutch East Indies (VOC) shortly after in 1602. It might very well be the Europeans, especially the Dutch, who later associated their indigenous religion with Hinduism. However, in light of Crawfurd's survey of Balinese Hinduism in 1820, such claims should be dismissed as there is no form of resemblance between the Nuaulu and the Balinese in practice or literature.

The lack of clarity on this subject from the informants does not allow us to know further how the Nuaulu initially heard of the "Hindu" label. There are no artefacts or manuscripts available on this. It would be safe to assume that they opted to call themselves Hindu in the wake of the

1965 Communist purge, which required adherence to a State-sponsored religion from every Indonesian. We do not know, however, who told them to opt for Hinduism.

Tribal Insignia

“Sir, I will wait in front of the harbour. I will be wearing a yellow shirt and red headband,” Esin messaged the researcher via WhatsApp. All along the road, the researcher notices several other drivers wearing the same red headband. Some even wore them beneath their motorcycle helmets. Moreover, Esin acknowledged and greeted every one of them as an identifier of the Nuaulu tribe. According to Esin, no matter their clan or village, all those who wear the *karinunu* headband are part of the tribe and, thus, considered family. The red headband has become a part of the tribe’s identity and has successfully done so in the open stage. According to Esin, the headband is only to be removed for sleeping and bathing or when permitted to be removed by the village shaman. Married Nuaulu women must wear the traditional patterned sarong cloth. The cloth is worn to show public decency and to respect their heritage. The tribe retains the head cloth as a mark of identity and belonging. This red headband, however, is exclusively worn by Nuaulu Hindus. Members of the tribe who have converted to another religion are not permitted to wear it. This is the extent of dedication the Nuaulus have toward the Hindu label. What does their practice and belief share in common with Hinduism, however, needs to be further investigated.

The Nuaulu God

Hinduism has always accommodated indigenous faiths. Historically, it is a compilation of such ancestral customs that have been formatted into Sanskrit terms and have adopted the Vedic worldview. Hindu theology is one such example of its assimilating nature. One can opt to call God in one’s mother tongue and may even depict God in the style of one’s local culture. Eventually, these many names and forms are manifestations of the single *Brahman*. The Javanese and Balinese have similarly known this same God by many names, including *Bhatāra Guru* and *Sanghyang Tunggal*. However, most Indonesian Hindus refer to this Brahman as *Īdā Saṅg Hyang Widhi Wasa*. Similarly, the Nuaulu have their name for God. They worship *Upuku Nahatana*. Nahatana is the source of creation and possessor of supernatural abilities (Tuny, 2013:29). Hir is also known as Upu Nahatana (Utami, 2015:127), Upu Kuanahatan, Upu Ama or Upu Lanite (Nina, 2012:76). However, glories of Nahatana and any theological concepts of Hir are vague and only preserved orally.

Ancestral Worship

The tribe also worship their ancestors. The high ancestral spirit is known as *Rea Upu*, and the tribe would frequently communicate with the spirit. The tribe would usually make profuse apologies to *Rea Upu* and claim their faith and allegiance to them. Every family may have a different *Rea Upus*, which is symbolized by different symbols or personalities (Tuny, 2013). Although the Veda and the core of Hindu orthodoxy do not profusely plead for the ancestors, ancestor worship is facilitated. Such worship is regarded as *Pitr-yajña*, wherein prayers and offerings are made. This can be seen in the *Pitr Sūkta* prayers of the 10th Mandala of the Ṛig Veda. Thus, the veneration of ancestors by the Nuaulu can be classified as Hinduism.

Moreover, they also believe in reincarnation. Raja Matoke said that their ancestors would return and even pointed out that some members of the family look like their *momoy* or grandfather. If a family member has the same face as their ancestor, the child will be given the same name as their *momoy*, reliving the name from generation to generation. Similar to the Hindu Balinese, the idea of reincarnation remains in a closed circle of relatives. This differs from the traditional Hindu and Buddhist dogma of reincarnation, which extends beyond the human species.

Taboo of Menstruation

The Nuaulu and Seram Island tribes hold many mysteries, especially concerning their socio-

cultural and religious life. The blood from a woman is considered impure, and therefore, girls experiencing their first period and women in their monthly cycles must isolate themselves in *posuna*. Women, after childbirth, must also do the same to avoid contaminating the home with their blood. Such subordination of women is common in patriarchal societies, such as the Balinese and the Batak. This taboo is also found in Hinduism. During menstruation, females are not permitted to partake in social and religious affairs, being considered tainted and ritually impure. The same case is also seen in Balinese Hinduism, with the idea of *cuntaka* or ritual impurity.

The subordination of females and the blatant patriarchy of Hinduism can be seen in the myth of Indra slaying Vṛtrā. For the demoniac Vṛtrā is a brāhmaṇa, Indra incurred great sin, which he must atone for. According to the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (6.4.9), he shared his sin with the waters, trees, earth, and women. In exchange for the ability to experience sexual orgasm, women received the sin of Indra that they must endure monthly. The subordination of women to an object and their recurring ritual impurity is repeated in classical Hindu literature and customs.

Ethics

The tribe believes that human beings possess two inclinations: the good and the evil. Thus, actions are divided by this duality. Good deeds are rewarded with *supuyake adat ganjaran*. Evil deeds are sinful or *monne* and can disturb the cosmic balance. This imbalance can cause nature's wrath, such as natural disasters, and one must beg for forgiveness (Tunny, 2013). According to Esin, begging for forgiveness is commonly done together, with the priest leading the ceremony. Failure to do so can lead to more unfortunate events, such as sudden fainting or being crushed by a tree while in the forest. Whilst the Vedic concept of karma does not necessarily believe in the duality of good and evil, some activities are pious (*puṇya*) and those that require atonement (*pāpa*). To maintain the cosmic balance is aligned with Hinduism.

Nature Spirits

The historic Nuaulu tribe of Seram Island is infamous for their beheading, which is perhaps one of the most controversial yet prevalent information one can find on their practice. Unfortunately, this stereotype has become a stigma. According to some scholars, traditional practices such as those of the Nuaulu arise from the belief that a person's head contains "soul matter" or life force that can be obtained through hunting (Hutton 1928). The head of the beheaded is customarily hung atop traditional houses to avoid bad omens. The beheading is also done for the coming-of-age *pataheri* ritual in boys, who must prove their manhood by such an action. Only then is the boy considered a man and can wear the honorary red headband of the tribe. Also, if a man would like to propose to a princess, a human head is presented as a dowry and as a symbol of his virility. Such traditions, however, are no longer conducted, the King claims. The research informant, Esin, also states that such beheadings no longer take place and have now been replaced with the slaughter of the cuscus animal, mammals that have nocturnal sacs (*Marsupialia*) part of the *Phalangeridae* genus.

The island is known as Negeri Nua Nea and Negeri Sepa, and its nature is still well-preserved. The Nuaulu people also believe in *Naha Tanah*, the spirit of the land. Before beginning any ceremony, the traditional chief must mention Naha Tanah. According to them, it is Naha Tanah who has allowed all humans and living things to exist on the land. Nina (2012:77-80) mentioned how the Nuaulu believe in a nature spirit. For example, before placing a trap for wild animals, they will place an offering of betel nut, leaf and tobacco for its spirit. The cooked animal is then divided into equal portions and shared with all the hunters. One of those portions is then divided into four parts and thrown in the four directions for the spirit of the deceased animal.

Hindus similarly acknowledge the presence of the spirit soul (the *ātman*) in all living entities. Thus, respecting all creatures as part of the Self and of God is deeply embedded in its beliefs

and rituals. To the outsider, such deep respect is viewed as animism. To sever the acknowledgement of spirit in all beings as mere animism is considered an injustice to Eastern and indigenous religions. As the tenet of the *ātman* is intrinsic to Hindu metaphysics, it should not be isolated as animism when it is applied to beings other than humans. Therefore, Hindus are not mere animists.

Hindus believe that the spirit and soul are present in all living creatures. Some of these souls are present within the non-moving living entity, such as the spirit of the tree or the plant. Some are present on it, such as the bacteria on a rock or the ant on the ground. Some are in it, such as the living microbes present in water. Furthermore, some are unseen nature spirits, ghosts or goblins that reside in natural environments. This is not animism but the belief in other forms of life beyond that of humanity. This is found in Hinduism, as well as in many indigenous religions, such as that of the Nuaulu.

Other Customs

An extended interview with Marwai Leipary in Latan also revealed other interesting customs. For example, each clan has food items they must avoid and are barred from entry from the temples of other clans. Men are not permitted in the *posuna*, which is strictly reserved for women. Prayers are to be conducted only by the village elders, who also elect their children for traditional assemblies. These traditions must be followed to avoid the dreaded curse of the ancestors. One of the most important offerings is betel nut, leaf, and lime. These three ingredients are integral and of extreme importance. Bahktin notes (in Rudyansjah, 2009) that the Nuaulu consider their customs to be something that remains relevant in the present day and is not a relic of the past.

To be “Hindu” and to be “Hinduized”

The Nuaulus are adamant about being identified as Hindus, not as adherents of an ancestral faith. As we have identified, many elements of their faith are aligned with Hindu tenets. Therefore, they would like to receive recognition for being “Hindu”. It is for this reason of official recognition that they send off their youth to Jakarta to study Hinduism and become religious education teachers. They want State-sponsored teachers and education facilities. They want meeting halls that will facilitate religious ceremonies and education. Locals such as Sukardi Rianto have done their best by establishing a non-formal *pasraman* (Hindu religious school) in Runnusa. Named Pasraman Souosa Sambrahma, it was established in 2019 and teaches children aged four and six for three days a week.

At the same time, however, the research team has noted that they are not eager to be Hinduized. They refuse to enter or pray in Hindu temples (*pura*), for they are not accustomed to the method of worship. They do not refer to nor know anything of the Veda, and no Sanskrit mantras are chanted or recognized. They see their God as independent of the Vedic gods, not identifiable as Śiva, Viṣṇu or any other deity. To be “Hinduized” here implies that they are not interested in adopting Vedic attributes or Sanskrit terms. They want the recognition, privilege, and support of an official religion without actual adoption of it. They can indeed proclaim themselves to be Hindus, but their disinterest in general Hindu theology and practice is concerning.

One should ask, however, whether being a true Hindu implies using Sanskrit or adopting Indian gods and philosophy. Well, for most of history, yes. Various regions have indigenous inherited belief systems, like that of the Nuaulu. However, in their adoption of the Vedic texts, gods, mantras, and philosophy, then they become “Hindu,” sharing commonalities with other so-called Hindu traditions. Without having these adapted to their worldview, their indigenous religion would remain, for lack of a better term, indigenous.

Two Options

However, going back to being an “*aliran kepercayaan*” or adherent of faith is not an option for them. This leaves two options for the Nuaulus: either Hinduism must accommodate them as they are, or the tribe abides by Hindu Dharma and applies it in some way to their belief.

The first option of incorporating the tribe would mean that the Nuaulus would not need to alter their traditions at all. However, it would be Hinduism that has to somehow scramble a justification for their acceptance. This will pose a problem for *Agama Hindus*, the formal religion defined and controlled by the Ministry of Religion. As there are clear definitions of who is and who is not a Hindu, the inclusion of the Nuaulu would atomically nullify them. For example, the tribe does not comprehend the theology of *Brahman*, the soul, incarnation, or karma, as defined in Hinduism. Most importantly, they do not abide by a sacred canon, a prerequisite that is fundamental for religions in Indonesia. Thus, this option would be easiest for the tribe, but would be ludicrous for the central government to accept. It would shame Hinduism for accepting indigenous tribal beliefs into religion proper and bring unwanted attention from majority Muslim critics.

The second option of incorporating Hinduism could be as easily associating the high god of the Nuaulu with a commonly accepted Vedic deity like Śiva, Indra, Viṣṇu, and others. This method of Hinduization is similar to the approach that took place in Java and Bali with their ancestral gods, Bhaṭāra Guru and Kaki Patuk, respectively. This is seen in the Tantu Panggelaran and Pūrvaka Bhūmi manuscripts. If the ancestral deity of the Nuaulu, Nahatana, were identified as a Hindu god, it would already imply that the Nuaulus are Hindus. In addition to Hinduizing Nahatana, the Vedas must also be accepted by the tribe. In order for a cult to be considered part of Hindu Dharma, it would have to have some association with the Veda, even though informally. As Nicholson (2010) elucidates, to be considered *āstika* or “believers”, there must be allegiance to the Veda.

In order to ensure the Nuaulus are undeniably Hindu, they should include the Veda as the source of their rituals or beliefs. For example, they could associate fire or incense with Agni, the Vedic fire god. However, the mere mention of “Veda” in their prayers would be sufficient, as is the case with many other orthodox Hindu traditions in their process of “Veda-ization” (see Pollock, 1985). This option would make it easier for the tribe’s declaration as Hindu and would be enough to prove their “Hindu-ness”. This is nonetheless a method of proselytization or even appropriation. However, this sort of modification is the safest method as it will ensure minimal impact on the indigenous religion and will ensure they are eligible to be considered Hindu as per the religion’s definition. It will, however, allow for further Hinduization as the tribe would be exposed to other myths, prayers and theologies present in the broader Hindu world. In order to avoid this and sustainably preserve their traditions, they should write down their theology, practices and central beliefs. As per other religious traditions, the priests and elders would then be associated as the *yajamanā*, the officiator of sacrifice, the noble Brāhmaṇas. Unrelated to the caste system based on birth as expressed in India and Bali, the *brāhmaṇa* title or class is reserved for those who carry the duties of priesthood and ritual preparation. In such a way, the Nuaulus would have a Vedic god, the Veda, and the Brāhmaṇas. This would allow them to be considered part of Hindu Dharma. However, they still would not be considered orthodox Hindus and would be classified as Folk Hindus.

Folk Hinduism

McDaniel (2007) attempts to distinguish the Hindu traditions into six generic types. They are (1) Folk Hinduism with cults of indigenous and tribal deities, (2) Śrauta/Vedic Hinduism, which emphasizes rituals codified in the Veda, (3) Vedāntic Hinduism that sponsors a monistic (Advaita) approach to the philosophical Upaniṣads, (4) Yogic Hinduism, which focuses on yoga practices, (5) “Dharmic” Hinduism, a lifestyle-based moral compass advocating for the performances of duty-led rites, and (6) Bhakti or devotional sects. It may be appropriate to classify the Nuaulus as part of this Folk Hinduism.

According to Blackburn, “the “folk” part of Folk Hinduism depends primarily on two factors: local control and prominence among certain social groups.” (1985: 257), which indicates that the practices are limited to a particular people group. This can be people of the same village or people of the same ethnicity, in contrast to a widespread religious phenomenon. It is also essential to note that Folk Hinduism is popular in “the middle and low levels of the caste and class hierarchies” (Blackburn, 1985:257) and the higher Brahmin caste is rarely involved. Blackburn (1987) further describes the hierarchy of their worship. A Vedic god-like Viṣṇu, Śiva, Hanumān, etc., are on top. A location-specific goddess considered an expansion of a pan-Indian Devī (like Śakti, Pārvatī, Kālī, Durgā, etc.) is worshipped in the middle. On the bottom and the most local level are supernatural beings such as ghosts or spirits (in Indian languages, *piśācu*, *bhūt*, *jinn*, etc.). Blackburn continues to describe these supernatural beings:

Typically, there are supernatural forms of humans who lived or were known in the locality, who died an unusual death, and who are now worshiped. They may be helpful or harmful, are always accessible, and are usually meddling. When the worship of these beings is regularized and elaborated with ritual, like the worship of other gods, there emerges what one might call “cults of the deified dead.” (1987; 258)

Local deities and spirits are also able to possess the body of the devout, but the high Vedic gods such as Śiva or Viṣṇu do not. Thus, there is a direct interaction between the worshippers and the worshipped. Direct interaction is a form of bodily possession, trance and dance. These local deities, usually of the deified dead, are celebrated in myths and folklore. These tales are heroic and based in a particular place and usually feature mortal dilemmas such as love and death. The return of the ancestors back to Divinity is not uncommon in classical or orthodox Hinduism. Rituals that are conducted after death, such as the *śrāddha*, include offerings known as *piṇḍa* meant for the deceased and to elevate them to the level of gods.

Folk Hinduism should not be viewed as a different branch, sect nor denomination of the religion. Instead, it is an expression of Hinduism that is found alongside its other five counterparts. These six, including Folk Hinduism, exists everywhere the religion is found. This does not infer that only in India can the true form of Hinduism be found whilst other remain as mere Folk Hinduism. In fact, in every corner of India this Folk Hinduism can be found and dominates the rural population. In Indonesia, and in Bali to be specific, Folk Hinduism is similarly present alongside the erudite Śiva Siddhānta and Śiva-Buddha practices. Thus, to classify Nuaulu as part of Folk Hinduism does not necessarily isolate them.

CONCLUSION

We have explored some facets of the Nuaulu’s belief system. These include their tribal insignia, God, ancestral worship, menstrual taboos, ethics, and nature spirits. One by one, we have seen how they are indeed similar to Hinduism. However, it is essential to recall that Hinduism is nothing but a loosely connected gathering of indigenous religions that share the same Sanskrit terms, Vedic divinities, and Indian philosophy. The Nuaulu lack these common terms, divinities and philosophies, making them an indigenous religion.

Indigenous religions, however, deserve to be recognized. They should not need to seek approval from an official religion to grant them access and facilities. However, this is obviously not the case in Indonesia, as exemplified in this study. This, in turn, creates a conundrum as, on the one hand, the Nuaulus are desperate for inclusion, and on the other, Hinduism must abide by its identity. It would obviously make more sense for the government to provide more attention and protection to indigenous faiths, the dreaded “*aliran kepercayaan*”. However, the stigma associated with the label has already deterred the tribe.

Their acceptance of Hinduism would be a compromise that would certainly imply a change to both the tribe and the religion. However, due to the negative repercussions, the authors of this paper suggest that the tribe pick the second option of including a Hindu god and the Veda in

their belief system. We understand that this would be difficult for the tribe to follow. However, this is undoubtedly the safest choice with the least negative repercussions. In response to this assimilation, Indonesian Hinduism must protect and respect the beliefs and practices of the Nuaulus and not agitate their traditions any further. It is with much difficulty and pity that the researchers write this paper. Understanding the situation of the tribe and the conditions of Hinduism is the best solution for their rightful protection and undoubted inclusion.

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