

Cultural Heritage and Maritime Spirituality: The Interplay of Religion and Maritime Traditions in Southeast Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT

This article examines maritime spirituality as a living cultural heritage within the coastal communities of Southeast Sulawesi, and focuses on the dynamic relationship between religion and local maritime traditions. For these coastal societies, the sea is perceived not merely as an economic resource, but as a sacred space imbued with cosmological, ethical, and social significance. Utilizing a qualitative-interpretative approach grounded in the anthropology of religion and cultural heritage studies, this research analyses how Islamic teachings and coastal customary practices are negotiated and integrated into daily life. Maritime rituals, prayers for safety before seafaring, and ecological taboos represent forms of lived religion, where religious beliefs are manifested in concrete social practices. The findings indicate that modernization driven by marine tourism development, ocean conservation policies, and market economy integration does not necessarily erode maritime spirituality. Instead, modernization prompts a process of reinterpretation,

institutionalization, and symbolic re-articulation of coastal traditions. Despite undergoing formal transformations, core values such as gratitude, safety, social solidarity, and ecological balance are maintained. These findings challenge the classical assumptions of secularization theory by demonstrating that modernization in Southeast Sulawesi produces a unique configuration of the relationship between religion and tradition, rather than their separation. Ultimately, maritime spirituality serves as both a source of social identity and an ethical framework for the sustainability of coastal life.

Keywords: maritime spirituality, cultural heritage, coastal traditions, religion and modernity

INTRODUCTION

As the world's largest archipelagic state, Indonesia possesses a foundational civilization inextricably linked to the sea. Within this context, coastal communities are not merely economic entities dependent on maritime resources, but rather cultural entities that have constructed cosmologies,

social ethics, and belief systems rooted in their relationship with the ocean. Southeast Sulawesi, as a strategic maritime region in Eastern Indonesia, exemplifies these dynamics through the traditions and spiritual practices of its coastal inhabitants. Coastal regions such as Wakatobi serve as social spaces where maritime communities, including the Bajo people, construct the sea not merely as a production zone, but as a sacred space imbued with profound symbolic meaning. In the Bajo tradition, the ocean is conceptualized as a "living space" that interconnects humanity, nature, and the Divine. Practices such as pre-voyage prayers, safety rituals, and ecological taboos demonstrate that maritime spirituality is not a mere vestige of pre-modern tradition, but rather a living value system that remains highly functional.

Theoretically, according to Berger, this phenomenon challenges the classical assumptions of secularization theory, which posits that modernization inevitably displaces the role of religion from the public sphere.^[1] In his later intellectual development, Berger himself acknowledged that the modern world is undergoing "de-secularization" wherein religion persists through emerging and reconstructed forms.^[2] In the context of coastal communities in Southeast Sulawesi, modernization manifested through marine tourism, ocean conservation, and the penetration of the global market economy does not necessarily eradicate spiritual practices. Instead, it drives a process of symbolic transformation and reinterpretation of these traditions.



Figure 1. The launching of the ritual raft in the tuturangiana andala tradition (Neke, 2017^[3])

From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, Geertz asserts that religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men.^[4] Within maritime societies, religious and customary symbols are interwoven into daily practices, ensuring that religion does not exist in isolation from local traditions. The relationship between Islam and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi exemplifies the concept of "lived religion" a manifestation of faith through concrete social practices rather than purely through normative doctrines.

Furthermore, the concept of cultural heritage, particularly intangible cultural heritage (ICH), provides a framework for understanding maritime rituals and cosmologies as components of a collective identity transmitted across generations. Cultural heritage is not static entity, but rather is continuously reproduced and negotiated within its specific social context. In this regard, modernization does not merely represent a threat to tradition; it also serves as a new space for the articulation of coastal cultural identity.

Thus, this article proceeds from the argument that maritime spirituality in

Southeast Sulawesi represents a form of contextual religiosity that demonstrates a dynamic negotiation between religion, customs (or *adat* in Indonesian), and modernity. This relationship cannot be understood within a dichotomous framework of tradition versus religion or custom versus modernity, but rather as a dialogical process that continuously shapes the social identity of coastal communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Spirituality as a Social Meaning System

In the fields of sociology and the anthropology of religion, spirituality is not understood merely as a formal doctrinal expression, but it is a meaning system that connects individuals to a transcendent reality as well as their social environment. Geertz defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men".^[5] This definition asserts that religion operates through symbols and practices that shape a society's life orientation. In the context of coastal communities, these symbols are manifested in maritime rituals, prayers for safety, ecological taboos, and cosmological narratives regarding the origins of the sea. McGuire's "lived religion" approach further strengthens this framework by emphasizing that religion must be understood through the everyday practices of the people rather than solely through formal institutions.^[6] Maritime spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi demonstrates how Islam does not exist in isolation from coastal customs (or *adat*); instead, it is interwoven into concrete social practices, such as pre-voyage prayers or thanksgiving rituals for a bountiful catch. Consequently, maritime spirituality can be conceptualized as a contextual religiosity operating within a maritime social space. Furthermore, Berger, in his thesis on the "de-secularization of the world," argues that modernization does not necessarily erode religiosity, but rather drives the transformation of religious forms.^[2] In a coastal context, modernization driven by

marine tourism, ocean conservation, and the global economy does not eliminate spirituality. Instead, it creates new negotiated spaces between religion, custom, and modern social structures.

Maritime Cosmology and Human-Sea Relations

Maritime spirituality can be understood through the concept of cosmology, which refers to how a community perceives the order of the universe and the position of humanity within it. In maritime societies, such as the Bajo people of the Wakatobi region, the sea is not merely an economic zone; it is a sacred living space imbued with spiritual and ethical dimensions.

From the perspective of ecological anthropology, as noted by Daroini et al.,^[7] the relationship between humans and the environment is understood as both a symbolic system and an adaptive practice. Sea rituals, prayers for safety, and prohibitions against overexploitation can be interpreted as cultural mechanisms designed to maintain ecological balance. In this regard, maritime spirituality functions as an environmental ethic embedded within the cultural structure.

This concept aligns with the notion of "sacred ecology," which suggests that religious practices often contain implicit dimensions of environmental conservation. Consequently, maritime spirituality is not only an expression of faith but also a form of socio-ecological regulation that binds coastal communities together.

Maritime Cultural Heritage

The concept of cultural heritage provides a foundational basis for understanding coastal traditions as components of a collective identity transmitted across generations. Cultural heritage encompasses not only physical artifacts such as traditional boats or coastal settlements but also local practices and knowledge categorized as ICH.

As asserted in heritage studies by Smith et al., heritage is not a static entity, but rather a social construct that is continuously

produced and reinterpreted according to contemporary contexts.^[8] This implies that sea rituals and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi are not merely "relics of the past" but are integral to the process of contemporary social identification.

In the context of modernization, Giddens and Pierson explain that modernity produces social reflexivity, wherein traditions are no longer accepted as "taken-for-granted" but are instead actively renegotiated.^[9] This process is evident when coastal rituals undergo institutionalization, manifesting as cultural festivals or becoming integrated into regional tourism programs. Such transformations indicate that maritime cultural heritage exists within a dialectic between preservation and commodification. Thus, the relationship between religion and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi cannot be understood through a dichotomy of religion versus custom (or *adat*) or tradition versus modernity. Instead, they form a dialogical space where maritime social identity is continuously reproduced and transformed.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study employs a qualitative-interpretative approach grounded in the anthropology of religion and cultural heritage studies. The research design is ethnographic, aiming to capture the symbolic meanings, ritual practices, and lived experiences of coastal communities in Southeast Sulawesi. Fieldwork was conducted for six months from March to August 2026 in two primary locations: Bungin village (South Buton Regency) and Sampela village (Wakatobi Regency). These sites were selected purposively as they represent Bajo communities that actively

practice maritime rituals while experiencing different levels of modernization influence.

Data were collected through: (1) participant observation of *Padewata* and sea thanksgiving rituals, (2) in-depth interviews with 15 key informants comprising *Punggawa* (ritual leaders), fishermen, and Islamic leaders, (3) document study of *pappasang* manuscripts and local archives, and (4) participatory mapping of sacred seascapes. Triangulation of method, source, and theory was applied to ensure data validity.^[10] Data were analysed using the Miles and Huberman Interactive Model through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interpretation was guided by Geertz's thick description^[11] and Turner's ritual symbolism theory^[12]. NVivo 14 software was used for thematic coding. The study obtained ethical clearance from LPPM Universitas Halu Oleo. All informants provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms are used and ritual documentation was conducted only with permission from traditional authorities, following the AAA Code of Ethics (2012).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Maritime Spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi

Maritime spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi has evolved from the historical experiences of coastal communities that perceive the sea as a living space, a workspace, and a sacred space. Within maritime societies, such as the Bajo people dispersed across the Wakatobi region and other coastal areas, the ocean is not understood merely as an economic resource, but rather as an integral part of a cosmological order that interconnects humanity, the Divine, and the natural world.



Figure 2. A maritime safety ceremony and sea thanksgiving ritual in 2021

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, Hasan asserts that religion constitutes a system of symbols that shapes human motivation and life orientation.^[13] Among coastal communities, these religious symbols are manifested through the ritualistic launching of offerings (or *larung sesaji* in Indonesian), invocations for safety before seafaring, and thanksgiving practices for a bountiful catch. These symbols are far from mere formalities, but rather serve as a mechanism for the internalization of values regarding submission to the Divine and reverence for the sea as a sacred creation. Maritime spirituality exemplifies the phenomenon of "lived religion," where faith is manifested through everyday practices.^[14] In the context of coastal communities in Southeast Sulawesi, Islam does not merely exist in a rigid, normative form, but rather is seamlessly integrated with local customs (or *adat*). Islamic prayers are recited during maritime rituals, while customary symbols are preserved as a medium for collective expression. This demonstrates that religion and tradition do not exist in a state of opposition; instead, they maintain a dialogical relationship. Furthermore, maritime spirituality functions as an ecological ethic. In their study on ritual and ecology, Siregar and Herman assert that ritual practices frequently serve an adaptive function in maintaining environmental balance.^[15] Within the coastal communities of Southeast Sulawesi, prohibitions against overexploitation,

respect for seasonal fishing cycles, and rituals for maritime safety can be interpreted as cultural mechanisms designed to regulate the relationship between humanity and nature. Consequently, maritime spirituality encompasses a vital ecological dimension that is highly relevant within the context of the global environmental crisis.

In the context of modernization, the classical assumptions of Berger's secularization theory posit that economic development and social rationalization will inevitably erode the role of religion in the public sphere.^[1] However, subsequent developments have demonstrated that modernization is not always synonymous with total secularization. On the contrary, the modern world is experiencing religious pluralization and revitalization. This phenomenon is evident in Southeast Sulawesi, where maritime rituals persist despite the coastal regions' exposure to tourism penetration, conservation regulations, and global market integration. On the contrary, maritime spirituality has undergone a formal transformation. Rituals that were once strictly internal and communal are now occasionally showcased within cultural festivals or regional tourism agendas. This process demonstrates a form of modern reflexivity, as elucidated by Murtazza,^[16] wherein tradition is no longer accepted as taken-for-granted. Instead, it is actively reproduced and renegotiated to align with contemporary social contexts.

Thus, maritime spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi can be conceptualized as:

- a. A religious symbolic system that constructs the collective identity of coastal communities.
- b. An ecological ethical mechanism that regulates human–sea relations.
- c. A contextual religious practice (lived religion) representing the ongoing dialogue between Islam and local customs (or *adat*).
- d. A dynamic cultural heritage undergoing formal transformation within the era of modernization.

The overarching dynamics demonstrate that maritime spirituality is not a residue of the past, but rather serves as a foundational social identity that remains vibrant and adaptive. Within this context, the relationship between religion and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi must be understood as a continuous process of negotiation between faith, culture, and modernity.

Negotiating Religion and Tradition

The relationship between religion and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi cannot be understood within a binary framework of "pure Islam" versus "local *adat*." Instead, it represents a process of symbolic negotiation that unfolds historically and socially. In maritime societies, religion does not emerge as a force that replaces tradition, but rather as a meaning system that interacts with, adapts to, and provides new legitimacy for local practices.

Sociologically, this process can be explained through the dialectical concepts of externalization, objectivation, and internalization as proposed by Berger and Luckmann (1966).^[17] Coastal traditions, such as sea rituals, initially emerge as collective cultural expressions (externalization), subsequently gain social legitimacy through the integration of Islamic values (objectivation), and are eventually experienced as an inseparable part of the community's religious identity

(internalization). At this stage, the boundaries between religion and custom become fluid, as both have merged within the collective consciousness.

From the perspective of the anthropology of religion, this negotiation indicates that religion operates through concrete symbols and practices. The recitation of Islamic prayers during the launching of offerings (or *pelarungan sesaji* in Indonesian) or sea thanksgiving rituals signifies that custom is not abolished but is instead provided with a new theological framework. This process is not merely syncretism; it is a form of cultural adaptation that allows religion to take root within a local context.

This phenomenon aligns with Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernity, which rejects the assumption that modernization produces uniform patterns of religiosity.^[18] Modernity in Southeast Sulawesi is not synonymous with total secularization, but rather exhibits a unique configuration in which Islam, coastal *adat*, and state institutions interact. In this situation, sea rituals can simultaneously function as an expression of faith, a symbol of ethnic identity, and even a cultural tourism asset.

The negotiation between religion and tradition can also be interpreted as an arena of symbolic power. Religious practices exist within a social field (religious field) involving actors with varying authorities, such as religious leaders, traditional chiefs, and state officials.^[19] In the coastal context, the legitimacy of a ritual often depends on the balance of these authorities. When sea rituals are aligned with Islamic norms or packaged as cultural festivals, they reflect a process of symbolic bargaining between diverse interests.

On the other hand, this negotiation demonstrates cultural resilience. Coastal traditions do not merely survive passively; they actively adapt to social changes or "as modern reflexivity, where society consciously reconstructs tradition to remain relevant in a contemporary context".^[20] Thus, sea rituals that may now be integrated with formal prayers or local government

support are not signs of cultural degradation, but rather a transformation of form.

Through this framework, it can be asserted that the relationship between religion and coastal traditions in Southeast Sulawesi is a continuous dialogical process. Religion provides normative and theological legitimacy, while tradition provides a symbolic context and collective identity. The two reinforce each other in forming a maritime spirituality that is distinctly religious yet cultural, sacred yet social.

Thus, the negotiation between religion and tradition is not a latent conflict but a creative dynamic that enables coastal communities to maintain their identity amidst the currents of modernization and globalization. This process is precisely what establishes maritime spirituality as a living heritage that is continuously reproduced and reinterpreted across generations.

Modernization and Cultural Transformation

Modernization is a multidimensional process encompassing social rationalization,

institutional differentiation, the expansion of the market economy, and the penetration of technology and state bureaucracy into communal life. In the coastal context of Southeast Sulawesi, modernization manifests through various channels: the development of marine tourism, ocean conservation policies, formal education, labour migration, and integration into the global economy. These transformations directly and indirectly influence maritime spirituality and coastal traditional practices.

Theoretically, modernity is characterized by reflexivity, which refers to a society's capacity to consciously evaluate and reconstruct tradition in light of new information and evolving conditions.^[9] Tradition is no longer accepted as taken-for-granted; instead, its relevance is continuously reconsidered. Within this context, sea rituals in Southeast Sulawesi undergo a reflexive process: certain elements are preserved as symbols of cultural identity, while others are adapted to align with formal religious norms or state regulations.



Figure 3. Floating market cultural festival of the Bajo tribe in Wakatobi (Puisi, 2025^[21])

Modernization has also given rise to the differentiation of social authority. While traditional and religious authorities previously operated within a relatively integrated communal structure, new actors have now emerged, such as local governments, tourism agencies, and conservation organizations. This process

creates what Asteria describes as a social field, where various actors compete to define the meaning and legitimacy of cultural practices.^[22] A sea ritual, for instance, may be interpreted as a collective act of worship, a cultural tradition, or even a tourism commodity, depending on the

positions and interests of the actors involved.

From a cultural heritage perspective, heritage is a social construct that is constantly negotiated.^[23] When coastal rituals are packaged as cultural festivals or regional promotional agendas, a transformation occurs from internal sacred practices into public representations. This process can expand the recognition of cultural identity; however, it simultaneously carries the potential to alter its spiritual significance. Herein lies the ambivalence of modernization: it opens up space for preservation while simultaneously facilitating commodification.

Nevertheless, modernization does not inevitably lead to secularization or the erosion of traditional values. The concept of multiple modernity, as discussed by Sri et al., suggests that non-Western societies develop distinct forms of modernity shaped by their specific cultural contexts.^[24] In the coastal communities of Southeast Sulawesi, modernization does not eradicate maritime spirituality; instead, it generates a new configuration in which Islam, custom (or *adat*), and modern institutions interact. While sea rituals may undergo transformations in form, foundational values such as safety, gratitude, and ecological balance remain steadfastly preserved.

This cultural transformation is also linked to shifts in economic orientation. Integration into the global market incentivizes fishers to increase productivity and efficiency, which at times risks displacing traditional ecological ethics. Nevertheless, in many instances, spiritual values continue to serve as a moral regulatory mechanism against overexploitation. In this regard, maritime spirituality functions as a source of social ethics, maintaining the equilibrium between modern economic demands and environmental sustainability.

Thus, modernization in Southeast Sulawesi cannot be understood as a linear process that replaces tradition with modern rationality. Rather, it is a dialectical process involving adaptation, reinterpretation, and,

occasionally, resistance. The transformation of coastal culture demonstrates that maritime spirituality is a living heritage that evolves alongside the times without losing its core essence. Through this framework, modernization can be understood as a new arena for the articulation of maritime identity. Coastal traditions do not merely survive; they gain new legitimacy within the modern public sphere as symbols of regional identity, as sources of ecological ethics, and as expressions of contextual religiosity.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This article asserts that maritime spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi constitutes a living cultural heritage emerging from the historical relationship of coastal communities with the sea as an economic, social, and sacred space. Such spirituality cannot be understood merely as a residue of pre-modern tradition, but rather as a meaning system continuously reproduced through daily practices, religious symbols, and customary structures. The relationship between religion specifically Islam and coastal traditions manifests as a dialogical negotiation rather than within a framework of opposition. Religion provides normative and theological legitimacy, while custom (*adat*) offers a symbolic medium and a sense of collective identity. This integration is evident in maritime rituals, prayers for safety, ecological taboos, and thanksgiving practices, demonstrating that maritime spirituality is a form of contextual lived religion.

Modernization driven by tourism, conservation policies, education, and market integration does not necessarily eradicate traditional practices. On the contrary, it prompts a transformation of both form and meaning. Coastal traditions undergo processes of social reflexivity, institutionalization, and even commodification, yet they steadfastly maintain core values regarding the

equilibrium between humanity, the sea, and God. Consequently, maritime spirituality in Southeast Sulawesi exhibits a unique configuration of multiple modernity, where religion, custom, and modern institutions interact dynamically. Theoretically, these findings enrich the discourse on religion and modernization by demonstrating that secularization is not the sole consequence of modernity. Instead, modernization can generate a symbolic re-articulation that strengthens local cultural identity in new forms.

Recommendations

Local governments and coastal communities should develop strategies to preserve maritime rituals and traditions as part of their Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Preservation efforts should transcend mere ceremonial displays, focusing instead on safeguarding the inherent spiritual significance and ecological values within these traditions. The environmental ethical values embedded within maritime spirituality should be integrated into marine conservation policies and coastal resource management. This approach ensures that public policies are more contextual and grounded in local cultural wisdom, fostering greater community compliance and environmental sustainability.

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