

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 15 (2010)

Artikel: Displaying religion in Western Flores : living in mixed catholic / muslim
neighbourhoods

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007309>

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DISPLAYING RELIGION IN WESTERN FLORES

LIVING IN MIXED CATHOLIC / MUSLIM NEIGHBOURHOODS



Text und Fotos: Sabine Zurschmitt



The photographs in this essay are the result of fieldwork conducted in 2007 among the Kempo people in Western Manggarai, the westernmost district of the island of Flores (Eastern Indonesia)¹.

In the largely Catholic Manggarai, Kempo belongs to one of the very few areas where around twenty percent of the indigenous population have embraced Islam. The local Muslims and Catholics both share a common dialect and a set of cultural values and practices, which they refer to by the term «*adat Kempo*». Moreover, many Kempo Muslims and Catholics are bonded together through a network of kinship and marriage alliances that results in a system of mutual rights and obligations. Whereas local people with different religious affiliations in other parts of Flores are often spatially segregated, Kempo Muslims and Catholics live together in mixed neighbourhoods in the same villages.

Living in each other's immediate vicinity, they meet and interact on a daily basis. Neighbours adhering to different religions (*agama*) may typically interact in a friendly but rather formal way, but can become close friends like the two women in Photo 1. Helina, the Muslima squatting down while flavouring pieces of fish, and Leni, the Catholic woman standing at the hearth arranging firewood, have formed a cordial friendship during the years they have lived side by side. Helina and Leni regularly spend a good deal of time together cooking, doing childcare, and chatting. Spending many hours with them, I witnessed how they usually talked about rather intimate problems they were both facing in their marriages. By contrast, their husbands admitted not really liking each other. They categorize each other as religious fanatics and rarely interact beyond the occasional running into one another inevitable as neighbours. While their husbands stress religious boundaries, then, for Helina and Leni being Muslima or Catholic is less important than the solidarity and mutual emotional assistance they have established through their common experience of being married Manggaraian women.

In everyday life, interreligious interactions are a personal matter. They may, thus, take a different shape for different members of the same family, as in the above example of Helina and Leni and their husbands. During community events, however, interreligious interactions in the form of mutual assistance and the exchange of goods

are rather institutionalized. Whenever a lifecycle or religious ritual takes place, neighbours invite each other to participate. To refuse such an invitation is considered an affront and requires a good excuse. Attending religious ceremonies and maintaining commensal relations are among the most crucial means by which a good relationship (*silaturahmi*), a sense of togetherness (*kebersamaan*), and intimacy (*keakraban*) beyond religious boundaries are established and perpetuated. During such ritual occasions, host and guest exchange material and immaterial goods (for example, food and money as well as congratulations); the latter is exemplarily depicted by the shaking of hands between the Muslim host family, in this case Helina and her husband, and their Catholic guests in Photo 2. It is particularly remarkable that Catholics and Muslims even pray together for their host's health and prosperity in these situations. In practice, the host normally leads the prayer in the form used by his religion while inviting all guests to pray silently according to their own religion. The cover image of this article illustrates such a situation at the name-giving ceremony of Helina's baby. The Catholic man holding his hands in his lap prays together with his Muslim neighbours for the child who has become a full member of the local society. While prayers and ritual speeches on formal occasions are almost exclusively a male domain, Muslim and Catholic women assist each other in preparing food and coffee to serve the other guests (Photo 3).

On the occasion of larger and more prestigious rituals, Kempo people generally expect those relatives who have migrated to urban centres on other islands in order to study and work to attend. The many migrant Kempo people who do come back (returning to their origins) capture the attention of the villagers who are often deeply impressed by their elegant, luxurious and modern lifestyles expressed through clothing, fashion accessories and technical equipment. Photo 4 displays a Muslim migrant recording the slaughter of a buffalo with his video camera. The woman in the picture, wearing fashionable Muslim garments (*busana Muslimah*), is the Javanese wife of another migrant Kempo Muslim; for her witnessing the slaughter of a buffalo appears to be a seldom seen and exciting experience worth filming with the camera of her mobile phone. Visiting her husband's place of origin for the first time, she revealed that she was shocked by «the poor conditions» (*kondisi sengsara*) in Manggarai: the modesty of the food even though a big ritual was being

¹ The name Kempo originates from an old, now abandoned, administrative unit, namely the *dal* or *kedalu*. However, local people still apply the term to describe themselves. In governmental terms, the geographic territory where Kempo people live comprises today's sub-district (*kecamatan*) Sano Nggoang.

performed along with the lack of water, stable electricity and surfaced roads². By producing their own effective visual memories, some of the migrant Kempo people consumed the ritual events at their places of origin as a form of entertainment and a leisure activity yielding spectacular holiday pictures of rural life that could be shown to other townsfolk upon their return home. Some sceptical villagers shared my impression of this and criticised the returnees for behaving like tourists, since they did, indeed, seem more focused on taking pictures than on the ritual process itself. Joking about the returnees' busying of themselves with their cameras, one villager advised me to employ them as they could provide me with photographs for my research, thus granting me more time to sit down and chat with the villagers.

AGAMA'S MODERNITY

When I repeatedly use the Indonesian term *agama*, as I will from now on, I am not applying this just as a synonym for the term «religion». I prefer the use of *agama* as this term points to a specific Indonesian understanding resulting from the religious policies imposed and controlled by the government since Indonesia's inception as a theistic Republic after independence from the Netherlands (1945). The establishment of *agama* as a prophetic, monotheistic book religion, to which every Indonesian citizen must confess, has become a constitutive principle in Indonesia's fashioning of itself as an independent and, in particular, modern nation state. Since that time, Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism and recently also Confucianism have been recognised legal *agama*, whereas indigenous belief systems have not been supported by the state (Lowenhaupt Tsing 1987: 197)³. Since full citizenship requires committing oneself to state-sanctioned *agama* (religious affiliation must be declared to receive an identity card), refusing to adopt an *agama* downgrades people «to the politically suspect position of those who do not yet have a religion» (Webb 2007: 154). Consequently, these people are disregarded as backward, ignorant and animist.

In Kempo, elderly villagers often complain that local beliefs and practices of worship or «remembering the ancestors» (*ingat nenek moyang*), as they called it, are eroding away because the young generation is no longer

interested in the old ways. «Being modern means having an *agama* and giving up the ways of the ancestors», one of the three Catholic ladies in Photo 5 stated, while holding a plate with chicken blood that serves as a medium to predict the future (in this case, that of a newly married couple in front of her). «All Kempo people have converted to *agama*. But some old people still practice what has been passed down by the ancestors», the woman to the right added. After the ceremony, the young couple confirmed the view of the elderly ladies and said that reading the future in the chicken blood would soon be an entirely «old-fashioned belief» (*kepercayaan kuno*). Moreover, they characterised this tradition as «the hobby of the old people», something distinctly different from *agama*.

DISPLAYING AGAMA IN KEMPO HOUSES

In the Kempo villages that I am familiar with, I have never visited a single house where no artefacts of *agama* were on display. Interestingly, people generally place various artefacts of *agama* in the «front room» (*lutur*) of their houses, which is the space in Manggarai houses that is most visible. These artefacts thus become material testimonies of *agama* demonstrating to the outside the occupant's religiousness or at least affirming the state-sanctioned directive of «having an *agama*». Approached from this angle, these artefacts serve as material evidence of their owners' commitment to *agama* and therefore become visible emblems of a wider national project.

In the context of Kempo's pluralistic religious environment, such artefacts – tantamount to the commitment to *agama* – act as «powerful indicators of identity» (Morgan 2005: 58), too. In the wake of the violent conflicts that have erupted between Christians and Muslims in various parts of Indonesia since the late 1990s, the population has become increasingly polarized along religious lines. In Kempo, too, *agama* has lately become a politically highly charged and very sensitive issue. Nowadays, talking about religious issues with the religious «Other» is considered very risky as it always bears the danger of unwittingly insulting someone. Consequently, *agama* has become a taboo topic among both Catholics and Muslims. In this sense, placing artefacts of *agama* in front rooms, where they are immediately visible to every person enter-

² The island of Flores is part of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), the poorest province in Indonesia.

³ As Picard (1997: 193ff) has pointed out for Balinese Hinduism, some of these religions had to be quite inventive when tailoring themselves to the government's guidelines in order to become a legally recognised *agama*.







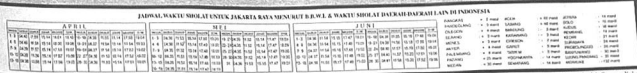




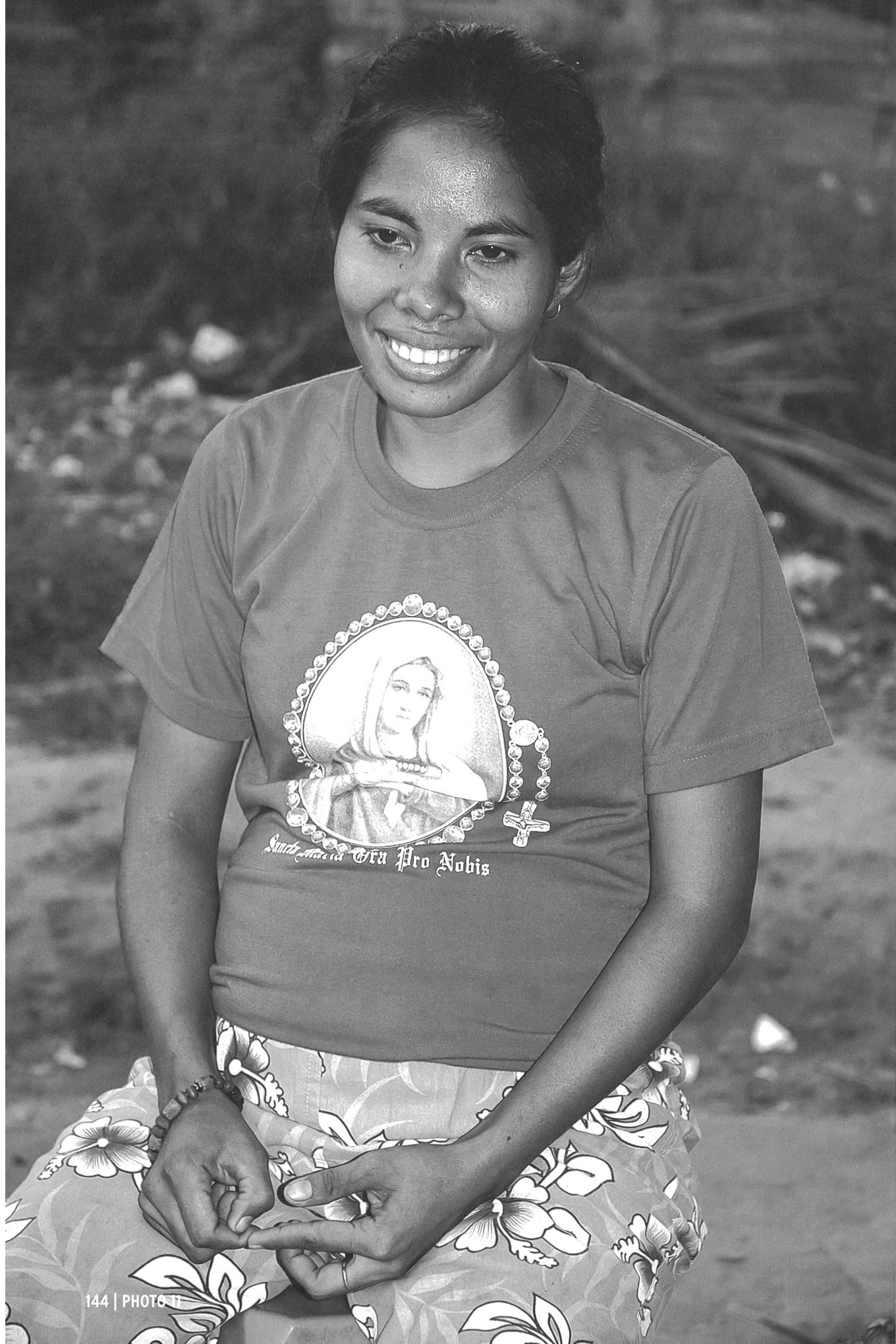














ing, serves to prevent visitors with a different religion from raising delicate issues. In other words, artefacts of *agama* frame the realm of the speakable.

Catholics normally expose *agama* in the form of crucifixes and various images and statues of Jesus, the Holy Mother and other Saints. Many Catholics have arranged a prayer niche or house-shrine in their front room, where they place depictions of biblical episodes, photos of the Pope, of local bishops and clerics, and diverse religious paraphernalia such as bibles, church song and prayer books, rosaries, bottles with Holy Water, candles, and plastic flowers (Photos 6 and 7). It struck me how the front rooms of Catholics who adhere to Charismatic movements were much more decorated – sometimes to the point of being crammed – with diverse images and devotional objects than those of «normal» Catholics. Catholic images are available in the local markets, where they are sold alongside posters of film, music and wrestling stars (Photo 8). Such a juxtaposition of Catholic icons and images of popular culture can be found in an almost identical way on the walls of some Catholic houses. Displaying posters of Asian and Western cinema and music stars is a way of being modern for those Catholics who use them, whereas it is a clear sign of moral decay for others. In general, Catholics holding Charismatic views as well as most Muslims only rarely display such posters, especially when sexily dressed women are depicted. They often not only condemn such posters as «pornographic» (*gambar porno*), but also criticise the people relating to them as dubious and lecherous.

Whereas Catholicism is known for its iconophile tradition, the whole notion of visual representation in Islam is more complex and subject to strong restrictions. The rigorous prohibition of certain pictorial representations in Islam, however, should not lead to the misguided conclusion that Muslims have no iconographic tradition at all. On the contrary, Kempo Muslims do have their own pictorial repertoire, which they display in the same way as Catholics in their front rooms. They make use of calendars including pictures of respected figures such as Islamic scholars (*ulama*), the Holy Kaaba, famous mosques, and Islamic boarding schools attended by their children. Photo 9 represents such a calendar picture I found on the wall of a pious Muslim family. This example well illustrates the notion of what I would call «*agama's* modernity»: the family on the calendar picture wears the new style of modest Islamic dress while sitting in their luxurious living room in front of the Qu'ran with the paterfamilias teaching his wife and children. By manifesting the ideal modern Islamic family fully devoting its life to Islam,

such pictures aim at persuading Muslims to adopt a moral lifestyle. After being asked what one could learn from this depiction, my interlocutor (a reform-oriented Islamic scholar) revealed what I would call the subtext of the image: «This picture is a means of *dakwah* [Islamic missionary endeavour]. It clearly shows that Islam is beautiful [*indah*] and progressive [*maju*]». Nevertheless, this moral imperative seems to be more important for Kempo's new religiously educated and reform-oriented Islamic elite than for ordinary Muslims who merely have such pictures in their front rooms as signifiers of their religious identity. On the whole, such Islamic posters and calendars are not considered as sacred.

However, most notable is the Muslims' use of calligraphic renderings of Qur'anic verses (Photo 10). Scholars sometimes classify these calligraphies as «image-texts», which means that they are neither just image nor just text but a fusion of both (Morgan 2005: 65). These forms of religious representation are very sacred «images» in Islam, enabling Muslims to «experience the iconicity of their holy texts» (Morgan 2005: 10f.). In this respect, I would claim, they are perhaps the most significant analogue to Catholic icons. In this practical sense, artefacts of *agama* are devotional objects employed to interact with the sacred and, moreover, as I often heard, they are protective charms serving to ward off malevolent forces and misfortunes. The pregnant woman with the T-shirt of Mother Mary (Photo 11) explained to me with similar logic that the T-shirt she wore not only indicated her Catholic faith but also protected her from magical attacks that could harm her and the unborn baby.

The growing tendency to accentuate *agama* as the most eminent aspect of a modern identity challenges the local equilibrium of communal relations existing beyond religious difference. One pertinent example comes in the form of veiling practices that have become a subject of inter-religious dispute: for Muslims with a reform-oriented attitude veiling a female baby is a further step towards modernity, while Catholics mostly interpret this practice as an explicit sign of the local Muslims religious radicalisation (Photo 12). It follows that *agama's* entanglement with modernity forces Muslims and Catholics in Kempo to renegotiate how *agama* is adopted, made sense of and adjusted with regard to local ideas of togetherness and mutual respect.

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