

# Deconstructing the Privileged Status of Religion over the Status of Belief as the Root of Discrimination towards Kejawen Community

**Muhammad Adiz Wasisto**

*Universitas Pembangunan Nasional "Veteran" Jakarta, Indonesia*

\*Email: [adizwasisto@upnvj.ac.id](mailto:adizwasisto@upnvj.ac.id)

## Abstract

The Kejawen community, recognized as a belief system rather than a formal religion, faces systemic discrimination in Indonesia. This distinction underpins the country's recognition of its political and legal status, thereby impeding the rights of Indigenous practitioners, including Kejawen followers. Several factors contribute to this systemic discrimination: the Western conception of religion, the dichotomy between religion and belief enshrined in Article 29 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution, the narrow definition of religion by the Indonesian Department of Religion, the association of indigenous beliefs with communism post-1965, and the application of blasphemy laws aimed at "purifying" religion while sidelining belief systems. This study aims to explore the discriminative dynamics against Kejawen within the binary framework of religion versus belief through qualitative research and critical discourse analysis. It seeks to uncover the ambiguity surrounding the concept of religion in Indonesia, drawing on a wide range of sources, including historical narratives, academic studies, relevant legislation, and judicial rulings. This research indicates a significant bias rooted in the differentiation between "religion" and "belief," primarily originating from Western perspectives on religion. This bias has led to the marginalization of Kejawen and other similar spiritual practices, which are often viewed as lesser compared to world religions.

**Keywords:** *Deconstruction, Kejawen, Religion, Belief, Indigenous Belief*

## Abstrak

Komunitas Kejawen, yang diakui sebagai sistem kepercayaan dan bukan agama formal, menghadapi diskriminasi sistemik di Indonesia. Perbedaan ini mendasari pengakuan negara atas status politik dan hukumnya, sehingga menghambat hak-hak praktisi masyarakat kepercayaan, termasuk pengikut Kejawen. Beberapa faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap diskriminasi sistemik ini: konsepsi agama Barat, dikotomi agama dan kepercayaan yang ada di Pasal 29 UUD 1945, definisi agama yang sempit oleh Departemen Agama Indonesia, pengaitan masyarakat kepercayaan dengan komunisme pasca tahun 1965 dan penerapan undang-undang penodaan agama yang bertujuan untuk "memurnikan" agama sambil mengesampingkan sistem kepercayaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dinamika diskriminatif terhadap Kejawen dalam kerangka biner agama versus keyakinan melalui penelitian kualitatif dan analisis wacana kritis. Laporan ini berupaya mengungkap ambiguitas seputar konsep agama di Indonesia, dengan memanfaatkan berbagai sumber, termasuk narasi sejarah, kajian akademis, peraturan perundang-undangan terkait, dan putusan pengadilan. Penelitian ini menunjukkan adanya bias signifikan yang berakar pada perbedaan antara "agama" dan "kepercayaan". Bias ini, yang terutama berasal dari perspektif Barat mengenai agama, telah menyebabkan marginalisasi Kejawen dan

praktik kepercayaan serupa lainnya. Akibatnya, agama-agama ini seringkali dipandang lebih rendah dibandingkan agama-agama dunia.

**Kata Kunci:** *Dekonstruksi, Kejawen, Agama, Kepercayaan, Penghayat Kepercayaan*

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## A. Introduction

A key issue related to the infringement on the religious freedom of the Kejawen community and its manifestation in the Indonesian social, cultural, political, and legal milieu is the preferential treatment given to the status of “religion” (*agama*) over that of “belief” (*kepercayaan*) (Kristina 2021). This elevated status of religion and the entities embodying the characteristics of religion are influenced by two interconnected factors.

Firstly, there is a biased binary system regarding the value of religion and belief which conceives the former as having the elements of sacredness and consequently superseded the value of the latter which is characterized by profanity (Maarif 2017). Such a view rests on the *prima facie* that constitutes belief as a product of culture. Culture, as commonly understood, is a societal custom which derived from a wide range of societal forces is deemed secular or profane although in reality, culture could also be influenced by religious factors, yet such fact often ignored (Abdulla 2018). Thus, by regarding belief merely as a product of culture, one might overlook the transcendental aspect inherent in belief. Ultimately, it could foster a perception that belief is inferior to religion (Bagir, Maarif, and Munjid 2015; Maarif 2017, 2018).

Moreover, under this perspective, culture, hence belief is considered a consequence of the religious system, implying a restricted sphere of influence compared to religion. The notion is that the secular aspects should not govern the sacred; rather, the sacred should influence the secular. However, in reality, religion and culture mutually shape each other through an interactive or dialectical process (Abdulla 2018). Simply put, religion, being a divinely inspired framework for the general order of existence, inherently plays a crucial role in forming and sanctioning the development of a culture.

This binary creates a distorted system of value that undermines any object that embodied the criterion of a belief hence culture and presented as having less or no characteristic to religion which *Kejawen* is included in this logic. The truth claims towards the proposition that religion has inherent authority to regulate individual behavior over a culture has discriminate belief system like *Kejawen*. Based on that view, *Kejawen* is perceived as merely a religious deviation from “the official religions” recognized by Indonesia because it is often perceived as a syncretic form of such “official religions” not as independent belief system that has its own theology (Wasisto 2021).

As a result, the discriminatory system ingrained in the idea of the privileged status of religion (*agama*) has given rise to the politics of recognition (Maarif 2017, 2018). This can be understood as a political effort undertaken by some group, utilizing religion as a tool to legitimize power and exert influence and control over other groups (*penghayat kepercayaan*), including *Kejawen* community. This form of religious politics has been implemented through mass mobilization, applying pressure in the name of the “majority” identity, and infiltrating state institutions. Thus, in turn, state institutions that had been infiltrated will produce policies and legislations that subjected to such politics, it implies that who are to be served (adherence of official religions) and who are not to be served (adherence of indigenous belief/*penghayat kepercayaan*) (Maarif 2017).

This research article aims to deconstruct the biased binary system that elevated the status of religion above that of belief instead looking and to uncover the process of subversion which creates the current stigma towards belief. In order to accurately locate such subversion processes, this paper applies principle of critical discourse analysis to systematically addressing which discourses shaped the discriminative policies and *vice versa*. This paper will delve into the ongoing debate surrounding whether belief should be considered an integral part of religion or regarded as entirely distinct from religion, a debate spurred by the hegemony of Western conception of religion, the inherent dichotomy in

Article 29 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution between religion and belief. The discourse is further influenced by the narrow definition of religion provided by the Indonesian Department of Religion, the establishment of *Pengawasan Aliran Kepercayaan* (PAKEM), the creation of *Badan Koordinasi Kebatinan Indonesia* (BKKI), the anti-communist rhetoric directed at *Kejawen* and other indigenous beliefs, the enactment of the Blasphemy Law, and the stipulations outlined in the Decree of the People's Consultative Assembly in 1973, among other relevant themes.

Furthermore, the research has two objectives: first, to investigate the historical and socio-political processes that have led to the marginalization of belief systems like *Kejawen* under the dominant framework of recognized religions; and second, to assess the impact of this marginalization on the religious freedom and social recognition of the *Kejawen* community and other similar indigenous beliefs. Through this analysis, the research intends to uncover the mechanisms of subversion that contribute to the current stigmatization of belief systems and advocate for a more inclusive understanding of religious and belief identities within the Indonesian context and beyond.

## **B. Method**

This research article employs the qualitative discourse analysis method or widely known as critical discourse analysis (CDA), entailing interpretive analysis of discourses relevant to the topic. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analysis method that looks specifically at the subjective underlying meaning of language or concept written or spoken communication within the context in which it takes place (Wodak and Kendall 2007). The chosen method is deliberately employed to uncover and understand the use and dynamics of power and power relations related to the use of the term “religion” and “belief” in Indonesian context (Van Dijk 1993; Wodak and Kendall 2007). CDA can provide insight into how language or term is used to construct mentioned social-political hierarchies. Also, the CDA, as mode of analysis, is effective to expose the inherent discrimination on why *Kejawen* and other indigenous belief are often

treated with deference, contempt, and inferiority a kind of normalized power (Wodak and Kendall 2007). This is the type of power that is expressed and imposed almost without anyone noticing because the superior status of religion over belief is built into people's assumption.

Moreover, the sources for data collection are carefully selected based on their relevance to the study's objectives, their contribution to understanding the discourse around religion and belief in Indonesia, and their potential to reveal power dynamics within this context. This includes official documents, media reports, religious texts, and public speeches by influential figures in Indonesian religion and politics. Additionally, sources are chosen to ensure a balanced representation of various religious and belief systems in Indonesia, including recognized religions and indigenous beliefs like *Kejawen*. Another benefit that could be obtained from employing CDA is that it highlights the nuances and contextualizing factors of your data meaning this research article analyzes and findings can have real-world implications for the research area. Lastly, the author has interpretative expertise or familiarity with the language under study.

### **C. Result and Discussion**

#### **1. The Religious and Political Stratification in Indonesia and the Political Standing of Kejawen.**

It is important to get a grasp regarding the political standing and stratification of religions and beliefs in Indonesia before starting to critically deconstruct and reveal the inherent discrimination embedded in the dichotomy of religion and belief. Islam, particularly Sunni Islam is undoubtedly holding the most privileged status in the religio-political hierarchy, beside other branches (*firqah*) i.e Shia and Ahmadiyya (Wahid 2018). However, such diversity in Islamic community is often disregarded by Indonesian Muslim. Any insinuation that tried to indicate pluralism within Islamic thought and theology is considered a foreign conspiracy to weaken the unity of Islam. As is generally known, Indonesian Muslim has an obsession to regard Islam as a monolithic body, theologically as well as politically (Ummah 2022). Nonetheless, Islam as viewed

as a unitary body still rank first in Indonesian religio-political hierarchy. Political Islam especially in the reformist strand of Indonesian Muslim community is alive and well despite the decades of depoliticization and suppression by the Nationalist, it has the consistency, ideology, and leadership a characteristic of organized political power.

Catholicism and Protestantism were also an organized political power until the disbandment of Catholic Party (*Partai Katolik/PK*) and Indonesian Christian Party (*Partai Kristen Indonesia/Parkindo*) on 10 January 1973 (Fionna 2021; Simbolon et al. 2023). In the reformation era, Parkindo has had brief resurgence from 2001 until 2009 under the new party name which is Peace Prosperity Party (*Partai Damai Sejahtera/PDS*) and had achieved considerable electoral success in 2004 general election (Sugiprawaty 2009). Although, Catholicism and Protestantism has had consistency in term of having established political parties and representative in parliament, yet they do not have their own ideological substance, they have to subscribe to the ideology of Pancasila in order to manifest their political thought and aspiration. They have to be confined in so called “political pluralism” (Rahman 2010).

Consequently, their political vocabularies are only limited to what I call “religious moderation politics” which focused on engaging inter-religious dialogue and fostering harmonious relationship between religious communities. Unlike political Islam which has the capability and power to invoke revolutionary politics in national level like demanding to revert Pancasila to Jakarta Charter and influencing national legislation and foreign policy with Islamic principles (Shalilah and Hozaini 2022). Christian politics does not have the same feat for that matter (with exception to regional politics like in South Sumatra, Moluccas and North Sulawesi), it only subjected and incorporated to broader nationalist project (Sugiprawaty 2009).

Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism also does not have the relevant political status in regard to the access to transform most of their religious principle into national politics and policy. The only religious principle that

allowed to be regarded is the principle that analogous with envisioning harmonious inter-religious community (Rahman 2010). Any other discussion outside given topic will be branded as an effort to foment sectarianism and identity politics which such same case would be tolerated if applied to political Islam at least for its constituency. They have to be careful not to emphasize their religious identity especially in terms of speaking out in favor of their religious principles in national political scene.

However, in case of regional politics and legislation, Hinduism has considerable political status in Bali as regards to transforming religious principle into regional policy. The best example of such transformation is the enactment of regional regulation (*Peraturan Daerah/PERDA*) Number 5 Year 2005 regarding Architectural Requirement for Building Structure which adopts the principle of *Tri Hita Karana* as well as *Asta Bumi* and *Asta Kosala* (Bagus et al. 2018).

Similarly, Buddhism also subjected to the “political pluralism” and “religious moderation politics”. Although, in scholarly context (which still extremely scarce), there are works that adopt principle of Buddhism in Indonesian political issue. In his work titled *Marhaneisme, Pancasila, and Trisakti: Antithesis for Corruption in Buddhism Perspective*, Gunawan Djayaputra who is also the head of regional council (DPP) Gerakan Pembumian Pancasila expounds the intricacies of criminal act of corruption, why it is so prevalent, and how to deal it according to Buddhist principle. Djayaputra incorporates the elements of *Lobha*, *Dosa*, and *Moha* which can be found in Buddhist religious teaching into the question of corruption (Rendy Arifin 2022).

After the annulment of Presidential Instruction Number 14 Year 1967 regarding Chinese Religion, Belief, and Custom by Abdurrahman Wahid with the enactment of Presidential Number 6 Year 2000, Confucianism and its adherent has gained *de facto* political recognition (Aprilia and Murtiningsih 2017). Whereas they also succumbed to the politics of religious moderation which limits their political rights in the traditional political sense. The pressure of such political mode is apparent in the behavior of one of key person in Confucian

community. Through his works, Budi Santoso Tanuwibowo who is the head of Indonesian Confucian High Council (*Majelis Tinggi Agama Khonghucu Indonesia/MATAKIN*) tends to cater such political mode by courting the political egoism of *status quo* and parroting the political pluralism of Pancasila without any critical reflection which ultimately undermines the healthy antagonism inherent in politics (Huda and Ilva Sari 2020). Such assertion is fairly evident in Tanuwibowo's famous books titled "*Indahnya Ramadhan Indahnya Persahabatan*" and "*Mensyukuri Kebinekaan, Mengukuhkan Persatuan, Menegaskan Keindonesiaan*".

In case of *Kejawen* and its adherents, even though they suffer the formal discrimination by the state through its regulations, the political thought of *Kejawen* has had its significance in 1949 until 1958 which lasted during the liberal period of Indonesian political development (van der Kroef et al. 1970). In this period, the parliament still debated and discussed the fundamental issues regarding the questions of ideology and general political course of Indonesia. The *Kejawen* politicians, so to speak, have had considerable influence in parliament and freely express their political philosophy which is based on *Kejawen* teaching. In their book titled "Indonesian Political Thinking 1945-1965" Herbert Feith and Lance Castles regarded *Kejawen* thought which they dubbed as "Javanese Traditionalism" as among five major streams of political thinking that influenced some political parties like Indonesia National Party (Partai Nasional Indonesia/PNI), Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia/PKI), Greater Indonesia Party (Partai Indonesia Raya/PIR), and *Gerinda* also with some addition of unattached intellectuals. Feith and Castles dedicated a section in their book to explicate *Kejawen's* stream of political thoughts (van der Kroef et al. 1970).

The early depiction of *Kejawen's* political thought is traced back to Soekarno's speech in June 1945, which is widely considered as the inaugural presentation and genesis of Pancasila. This association might appear unusual since Soekarno never openly professed to be a follower of *Kejawen*. However, when elucidating the fourth tenet of Pancasila, which emphasizes social justice,



Soekarno drew parallels to the concept of Ratu Adil, a fundamental element in *Kejawen's* philosophy. Soekarno asserted that the notion of Ratu Adil was conceived by “the Indonesian people,” born from their deep-seated yearnings during times when they experienced a lack of prosperity, thus the principle of social justice is prerequisite to people’s need (van der Kroef et al. 1970).

Another form of depiction of *Kejawen's* political thought was appeared in the article written by R.M.S. Soeriokoesoemo titled “*Sabdo Pandito Ratoe*” (“The Words of the Wise Prince”) which serve as a critique to the liberal aspect of equality shown in United States Declaration of Independence that asserted the divine origin that men are created equal. Soeriokoesoemo contended that the liberal concept of equality was flawed due to its superficial understanding of the natural order (van der Kroef et al. 1970). He argued that although humans originate from a common source and share a singular life, they manifest in diverse forms, each adhering to its unique laws and true to its inherent nature. Hence, while equality is essential, its implementation should be tailored to the individual's natural characteristics. The wise should be treated in a manner befitting their wisdom, just as the idiot should be approached differently. Similarly, the needs of the poor should be addressed distinctively from those of the rich, recognizing that different forms of equality are required for each.

*Kejawen's* political thought was expressed not just through philosophical propositions and investigation, but also through sociological observations, especially concerning the political rivalry between two distinct political groups. Atmodarminto the leader of Gerinda, in a speech to the constituent assembly on November 12, 1957, presented a compelling argument against the proposal for an Islamic state by Masjumi and other fundamentalist Muslims. He challenged the notion that Indonesia should be an Islamic state based on demographics showing a majority Muslim population. Atmodarminto argued that this surface-level analysis failed to capture the true religious landscape of Indonesia. He pointed out that many Indonesians could be considered “nominal Muslims” or “Muslims in façade,” who largely follow a syncretic belief system deeply rooted

in Hindu-Javanese traditions (van der Kroef et al. 1970). This belief system, he argued, often takes precedence over Islamic traditions, particularly among the *Kejawen* community, which represents a significant portion of these “nominal Muslims.”

Atmodarminto further elaborated in his speech that the syncretic belief system he mentioned continues to be a foundational element of Indonesian society. He noted that practices such as ancestor worship, offerings to spirits believed to bring fortune, and pilgrimages to sacred sites remained widespread (van der Kroef et al. 1970). Additionally, Atmodarminto highlighted that even Islamic events, such as the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birth, were observed in line with these syncretic beliefs. For instance, during these celebrations, people would prepare special dishes like rice and chicken as a way of honoring the Prophet, integrating traditional practices with Islamic observances.

Atmodarminto also argued against the notion that the Islamic conquest in Java was a consequence of the growth and spread of an Islamic society in Indonesia, or because the majority of the people in these kingdoms embracing Islam (van der Kroef et al. 1970). He explained that these Islamic kingdoms were established primarily due to the ambitions of the rulers and their close, influential associates. This, he stated, is the reason why, to this day, the Muslim religion has not come to dominate Indonesian society. Additionally, Atmodarminto highlighted the historical account of Islamic conquests, such as the act of treason of Raden Patah which resulting to the decline of the Majapahit Empire and the 1579 invasion of the Hindu-Javanese kingdom of Padjajaran by the forces of the Demak, Padjang, and Mataram Kingdoms.

The above details illustrate that *Kejawen*, compared to other indigenous belief systems such as Parmalim, Sunda Wiwitan, Marapu, and similar faiths, held a more intricate, complex, and elevated political standing, due to large number of followers and influential Javanese-*Kejawen* politicians in parliament. In that period, *Kejawen* had a political consistency in term of political parties and

the ability to convey their political and philosophical view in public without fear of reprimand from hard-liner Islamic constituent. Furthermore, other lesser-known religions such as Judaism, Bahaism, and Sikhism remain marginalized, primarily due to their small number of adherents, limited education and social awareness about these religions, and ultimately the reluctant recognizing those religions by the government.

## **2. The Hegemony of Western Conception of Religion and its Manifestation Towards Kejawen in Indonesia**

In article titled “Revisiting the Definition of Religion, World Religions, and Ancestral Faiths,” Samsul Maarif discusses how Indonesia, through its government policies and academic perspectives, has mimicked Western definitions of religion (Maarif 2017). This approach fosters an ethnocentric, monotheistic, and essentialist understanding of religion, affecting popular perceptions and leading to discrimination and repression of indigenous beliefs. These indigenous beliefs, including *Kejawen*, are often viewed as inferior to major world religions like Christianity and Islam, as they don't encompass all aspects of these larger faiths (Maarif 2018; Wasisto 2021). As a result, they are pejoratively labeled as animistic, anti-modern, heretical, and primitive. Particularly for *Kejawen*, during the 1960s and the height of anti-communist rhetoric, it was also falsely associated with communism.

Maarif bases his analysis on Daniel Dubuisson's argument that the concept of “religion” is a construct rooted in Western history and culture (Engler 2006; Engler and Miller 2006). Dubuisson points out that as a category filled with “theoretical baggage,” it is flawed and risky to use as a tool for comparative studies in religion. He emphasizes that the field of religious studies originated from a Western viewpoint, leading to an inevitable entrapment within its meanings and conceptual frameworks. According to Dubuisson, the Western concept of religion imposes a binary structure, delineating opposites such as God/Man, Spirit/Form, Sacred/Profane, and Orthodox/Heterodox which is inherently a Christian one (Engler and Miller 2006).

The way religion is constructed and defined in studies is not random but intentional. This framework is designed to perpetuate superiority of the political *status quo* upon which Western civilization depends. Christopher R. Cotter and David Robertson argue that the concept of religion, as shaped by Western norms and values, serves to uphold Western interests and dominance. This Western-centric definition of “religion” is universally imposed, particularly on Eastern countries and civilization (Alberts 2018). Its hegemonic nature has led to widespread acceptance without critical examination. A significant outcome of this situation is the perception of religion, as defined by Western constructs, as being straightforward and devoid of complexity and historical struggles.

The Western-centric concept of “religion” is not based on empirical evidence and is inherently subjective and ethnocentric, as revealed through genealogical studies. These studies show how the term and its understanding have evolved over time into a perceived essential and monolithic entity. Before the first century, activities or practices were considered religious if they were obligatory or taboo. This included vows, acts of politeness or courtesy, cultic obedience, and a range of similar activities. Originally, the term 'religion' or '*religio*' was used to denote occult practices, which referred to ritualistic activities, mandatory practices, and traditions linked to ancestor worship. At this time, religion was seen more as a set of behaviors and customs, not necessarily tied to the concept of a deity (Engler and Miller 2006; Maarif 2017). The association of religion with the notion of God did not emerge until after the first century.

In the first century, the conversation around defining what constitutes religion shifted significantly due to the influence of Christianity. Previously, religion was seen primarily as a set of attitudes and behaviors related to obligations and prohibitions. However, Christianity introduced a new dimension to this understanding by emphasizing the importance of belief in God or supernatural powers beyond human control (Engler 2006; Engler and Miller 2006). This emphasis on devotion to a deity or external supernatural entities became a fundamental aspect of religious perception during this era. Several

centuries later, the Christian community incorporated the concept of the church into the definition of religion. This addition represented an organized and structured community governed by a defined leadership hierarchy. Furthermore, Christianity also introduced faith as a fundamental characteristic of religion.

In the fourth century, the field of comparative religion began to evolve within the Christian tradition. Christianity was exposed to other religious traditions that differed in both substance and form. Jonathan Z. Smith notes that Christianity differentiated itself by juxtaposing “our religion” against “their religion” in a binary manner (Maarif 2017). As Christianity emerged as the prevailing faith in the fifth century, the term “religion” increasingly became synonymous with Christianity itself, sidelining other faiths as non-religious. These other beliefs were labeled as Pagan or Heathen, characterized primarily by idol worship. Such practices were depicted as cultic activities, urging the Christian community to denounce them as they were seen as fundamentally opposed to Christian values (Maarif 2017).

This comparative approach was carried forward into the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, taking on a more scientific perspective. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century signified a transition from the singular notion of “religion” to a pluralistic view of “religions,” a change prompted by the discovery of non-European religions such as Judaism and Islam (Bagir et al. 2015; Maarif 2017). This shift was driven by an intellectual movement that sought to classify the diverse religious practices found in other parts of the world. Both missionaries and colonialists contributed ethnographic descriptions of non-European societies, further enriching this expanding view of seemingly religious diversity. The concept of religions (plural) becomes the basis of modern concept of religion. The endeavor to categorize non-European religions reached its zenith in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during which time new religious classifications emerged within European categorizations, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. This period marked

significant growth in the broadening of the religious category (Bagir et al. 2015; Maarif 2017).

However, the modern concept of religion, often referred to as “World Religions,” which presumably acknowledges the existence of various religions, is inherently filled with arbitrary appropriations and ambiguities (Alberts 2018). The so-called “new religions” were categorized according to Christian and European notions of religion. Moreover, such categorization was influenced by the political and cultural power these religions wielded. The geopolitical significance of a religion also became a criterion for determining whether it should be considered on par with Christianity. Under this assumption, indigenous beliefs and religions are deprived of their agency as legitimate entities embodying elements of religion. Indeed, the repercussions of the World Religions paradigm are particularly noticeable in the classification and theorization of indigenous religions and beliefs (Alberts 2018).

In the 19th century, anthropological studies turned their focus to the examination of indigenous beliefs and religions, which were fundamentally different from the previously established categories of “World Religions.” Anthropologists of that era described communities adhering to such ideas and practices as essentially primitive and unresponsive to modernity in the manner observed in other communities, thus labeling them as static in comparison to the scientific and technological advancements of history (Methenitis 2019). Through such perspectives, indigenous beliefs and religions were subjected to a range of pejorative labels, including animism, fetishism, totemism, and shamanism, all considered forms of degeneracy (Maarif 2017; Methenitis 2019). Adherents to these ideas and practices were deemed morally corrupt, which ultimately portrayed them as immoral.

The treatment of the *Kejawen* community in Indonesia, along with other indigenous beliefs, is a stark example of how epistemic violence can result in barbarism in practice (Wasisto 2021). The narrow viewpoint of “world religions” tends to marginalize indigenous beliefs such as *Kejawen*. Despite the “world

religions” paradigm often being associated with pluralistic rhetoric, it effectively excludes indigenous faiths. From the advent of Christianity, local and indigenous spiritual practices have been derogatorily termed as idolatry, paganism, and heathenism. These pejoratives have historically been, and continue to be, employed to depict indigenous religions as symbols of primitiveness and backwardness. This European-centric view serves as a mechanism for cultural domination or as a rationale for such domination (Engler 2006). It suggests that indigenous religious communities ought to alter their cultures, beliefs, lifestyles, and adopt Christianity or Islam, especially in contemporary Indonesia, to align with what is considered modern and progressive. This logic has been a potent justification for colonialism.

The prevalent framework for interpreting indigenous spiritual systems, including *Kejawen*, is animism (Maarif 2017). This concept, transcending academic boundaries, has significantly influenced both public perception and policy concerning indigenous beliefs. Originating from the work of E.B. Tylor, animism is understood as a belief in spirits, posited as the foundational stage in the evolution of global religious practices. According to Tylor, animism reflects the worldview of early humans, suggesting that such beliefs were a precursor to world religions. He argued that with the progression of society and advancements in technology, this primitive mindset should be discarded in favor of more structured religious beliefs (Methenitis 2019).

In the context of Tylor's theory of animism, the approach to the world religions paradigm can be seen in his examination of indigenous religious practices, such as the reverence of trees, stones, and other elements of nature (Methenitis 2019). Tylor, through his Western lens which focuses on the binary distinction between the human (subject) and nature (object), posited that it is improbable for such cultures to genuinely worship natural objects, as these are considered inanimate. He argued that the worship of natural elements by indigenous religions represents a mistaken belief system, where natural objects are erroneously attributed with life (Maarif 2017; Methenitis 2019). Tylor further

contended that indigenous spiritual practices do not fit into the category of world religions. While he acknowledged that they could be seen as precursors to more organized religions, he believed they lacked key characteristics found in religions like Christianity, thereby excluding them from the world religions classification.

*Kejawen* as a belief system perceived as primitive and irrational which is not incompatible with the spirit of modernity by other dominant religious groups like Islam and Christianity. This perception does not only derive from E.B Tylor theory of animism but also derived from the understanding of modernity *vis a vis* religion that creating a paradigm which religion has to be rational and modern in the broadest sense.

The gap between religion, science, and modernity is reconciled through recent developments in the philosophy of religion, as informed by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga, in his reformed epistemology, argues that belief in God or adherence to a religion does not need to be based on evidence and argument to be rationally justified. According to him, belief in God is a basic, innate feeling, which he parallels with our belief in other minds or the external world – both of which are basic and require no rationally justified evidence (Kvandal 2020).

This proposition has, in a way, revalidated religion after it was undermined by Enlightenment rationality and secular humanism. Although the Global South, especially Indonesia, has never dismissed religion as a societal asset that could contribute productively to political and moral questions, the West's struggle to bridge the gap between religion and science has spread to other parts of the world. This dynamic has pressured theologians to make their religions compatible with modern science. The effort to gain approval from modern science is evident in the work of Nidhal Guessoum and Ehsan Masood in the Islamic world, as well as among Christian apologists like William Lane Craig (Bobier 2013; Marchant 2009; Rofiq and Hasbi 2021).

The apparent successful reconciliation between religion and modern science in both the Islamic and Christian communities has bolstered confidence in the truth of their faiths, especially in comparison to modern rationality.



However, this newfound confidence frequently extends beyond the specific context of religion and science. Consequently, members of both communities hold the belief that their theological viewpoints and prescribed rituals are inherently true and valid, independent of any scientific validation. Such attitudes may lead to the marginalization of varied theological views and practices associated with belief systems deemed animistic or primitive, such as *Kejawen*. Furthermore, there's a prevailing notion that these indigenous religions and beliefs are irrational, stemming from a biased comparison with their own religious principle.

### **3. Discriminative Practices of the Paradigm of World Religions and initiatives to counteract these practices: The Case of Indonesia**

The monolithic and Eurocentric concept of World Religions has been disseminated worldwide, with Indonesia being no exception. In this section, the paper will explore the consequences of this paradigm, characterized by its inherent exclusion and discrimination against *Kejawen* and other indigenous religions and beliefs.

The debate over whether practices based on the distinction between religion and belief are discriminatory finds its core in the legal and constitutional interpretation of Article 29, Clause 2 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution, rather than in sociological facts. This clause states, "The State guarantees every individual the freedom to worship according to their own religion and belief." During that period, political leaders and intellectuals engaged in debates about whether belief systems should be considered equal to religions or seen as lesser (Crouch 2012).

The discussion around the definitive interpretation of that section remains unresolved. Instead, the Indonesian government has taken it upon itself to unilaterally determine the meaning of what constitutes a religion. The Department of Religion (Departemen Agama/DEPAG), established in 1946, is tasked with defining religion (Maarif 2017, 2018). According to DEPAG, a set of criteria, including having a scripture, a prophet, and international

acknowledgment, must be fulfilled for a belief system to be recognized as a religion. These criteria effectively exclude indigenous religions that do not meet these specific requirements, thereby denying them recognition and, as a result, access to state-provided social services. Such a narrow definition fails to honor *de facto* and ideological diversity present within Indonesia and should be abandoned. Moreover, this approach by the government and state agencies shows a disregard for the rights of indigenous religions, treating them as an administrative burden, with a clear preference for accommodating world religions.

The marginalization of indigenous religions persisted with the creation of the Monitoring Agency for Community Belief Systems (*Pengawasan Aliran Kepercayaan Masyarakat/PAKEM*) in 1953. PAKEM is tasked with overseeing and reporting on belief systems that may pose a risk to public order, specifically the theological integrity and security of recognized religions in Indonesia, despite the state not having the authority to define religion or to declare any belief system as heretical or deviant (Bagir et al. 2015; Maarif 2017, 2018). Another role of PAKEM is to ensure that these belief systems do not evolve into recognized religions. The formation of PAKEM further perpetuates the notion that indigenous belief systems (*kepercayaan*) are a threat to the religious purity and public order, suggesting that they need to be regulated and restricted by the state.

The heavy-handed approach of institutional constraints against indigenous beliefs overlooks the actual sociological facts of Indonesia's religious diversity, particularly the variety of sects and belief systems present. Some citizens identify as followers of indigenous beliefs, which are fundamentally distinct from the organized religions recognized by DEPAG. These individuals have formed and joined groups known as "*perkumpulan/organisasi kebatinan*". According to records from DEPAG, the number of these *kebatinan* organizations rose from 29 in 1952 to 360 by 1953 (Maarif 2017, 2018). However, these sociological realities are merely seen as statistics on paper rather than as critical inputs for shaping inclusive policies.

Aware of this assault from the state, in 1955, the *kebatinan* community, led by Wongsonegoro, the former deputy minister and governor of Central Java, formed the Indonesian *Kebatinan* Coordinating Body (Badan Koordinasi Kebatinan Indonesia/BKKI) (Maarif 2018). The purpose of creating such an organization was to consolidate the social and political standing of the *Kebatinan* community to resist the stigmatization and control from PAKEM, which derived from a narrow definition of religion that adopted the Western model of religion, i.e., Christianity, and the cultural hegemony of Islamic values. In the same year, on 19-21 December, BKKI, under Wongsonegoro, held its first congress to proclaim that the *Kebatinan* community has the same rights as any major religious group in Indonesia to participate in productive social and political life without discrimination (Maarif 2017). Furthermore, to reinforce its claim, BKKI approached Soekarno by sending him a letter asking for his commitment to settle this issue that has plagued the *Kebatinan* community.

The political turmoil of 1965, triggered by the apparent failure of a coup by the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia/PKI*) and a countercoup by the Indonesian military, intensified the stigmatization of the *kebatinan* community, particularly within the *Kejawen* circles predominantly found in Java. The fallout from these events led to a situation where adherence to *Kejawen* was arbitrarily associated with communism, further entrenching the stigma that the *Kejawen* belief system was inherently blasphemous and atheistic, mirroring the misconceptions about communism held by its adversaries. Consequently, there was an effort to link *Kejawen* with communism and reinforce the existing power structures by continuing the marginalization of indigenous religions and beliefs, especially *Kejawen*.

In the same year, on January 27, 1965, the discriminatory Blasphemy Act No. 1 of 1965 (*Undang-Undang Nomor 1/PNPS tahun 1965 tentang Pencegahan Penyalahgunaan dan/atau Penodaan Agama*) was introduced, essentially safeguarding the five state-recognized world religions - Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism - against defamation and blasphemous

actions (Crouch 2012). The provisions of this act were later incorporated into the criminal code. This legislation posed a direct threat to indigenous beliefs, whose practices and rites were deemed blasphemous from the perspective of these religions. The act aimed to cleanse religious practices of syncretic elements associated with indigenous beliefs and religions. It was predicated on the idea that its definition of blasphemy could disrupt public order and pose a threat to the state.

Amidst the “red scare” and anti-communist sentiments, along with the enactment of the Blasphemy Act, the BKKI found itself compelled to go into a hiatus, fearing that its continued activism could lead to violent reprisals and further discrimination (Maarif 2017).

During Soeharto's New Order Era, *Kebatinan*, now referred to as *Kepercayaan*, saw a hopeful future. In the initial years of Soeharto's regime, *Kepercayaan* was regarded on par with established religions. Soeharto's ruling party, Golkar (*Golongan Karya*), set up a cooperation secretariat for *Kepercayaan* (*Sekretariat Kerjasama Kepercayaan/SKK*) in 1970 (Maarif 2017, 2018). The primary aim of this body was to elevate the status of *Kepercayaan* civil organizations to be on equal footing with those of other religions, particularly Islam, thereby enhancing their political and social recognition. Bolstered by state support, the BKKI ended its hiatus and rebranded as the *Badan Kongres Kepercayaan Kejiwaan Kerohanian Kebatinan Indonesia* or BK5I. This organization convened a symposium from November 7 to 9, 1970, to deliberate on the definition of *Kepercayaan* and its equivalence to other related concepts such as *Kebatinan*, *Kerohanian*, and *Kejiwaan*, affirming that *Kepercayaan* should be considered as equal to religion (Maarif 2017).

Following the symposium, adherents of *Kepercayaan*, represented by BK5I, approached President Soeharto to present a series of requests. These included the formal recognition of *Kepercayaan*, the implementation of Pancasila-based moral education that is not tied to any specific religion and therefore more inclusive, the clarification of the legal standing of the *Sekretariat Kerjasama Kepercayaan*

(SKK), and the proposal to designate Satu Suro, the first day of the Javanese calendar year in the month of Suro, as a national holiday (Maarif 2017).

The efforts to liberate *Kepercayaan* from various forms of discrimination – social, legal, cultural, and political – were definitively affirmed with the 1973 Decree of the People's Consultative Assembly (TAP MPR) on the nation's policy direction (Garis Besar Haluan Negara/GBHN). This decree stated that “*Kepercayaan*” and “religion” both represent valid expressions of faith in the one supreme God (Tuhan yang Maha Esa), officially acknowledging their equality. This decree marked the state's formal recognition of *Kepercayaan* on par with other religions (Maarif 2017, 2018).

The second phase of Soeharto's New Order brought about a significant setback for the *Kepercayaan* community, which felt betrayed. The enactment of the People's Consultative Assembly Decree IV/MPR/1978 reversed the previous legal acknowledgment that had placed *Kepercayaan* on equal footing with recognized religions. This new decree downgraded *Kepercayaan*, suggesting that belief in the one supreme God (*Kepercayaan terhadap Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*) – a phrase often used to describe the faith of *Kepercayaan* or indigenous religions – did not constitute a recognized religion (Maarif 2017). Furthermore, it mandated state supervision (*pembinaan*) over these groups to prevent the formation of new religions that could potentially threaten the stability of the state-recognized major religions.

Following the decree, Indonesia's policy direction shifted significantly, recognizing only five major world religions and elevating their status over indigenous beliefs and religions, including *Kepercayaan*. A critical consequence of this shift was the requirement for individuals to declare their religious affiliation on all civil registration documents, a prerequisite for accessing social services, including those related to administrative legality such as marriage and funeral arrangements. This policy effectively deprived adherents of indigenous religions and beliefs, such as *Kejawen*, of their civil rights to obtain social services, leading to a situation where a portion of the population associated with indigenous

religions and beliefs faced systemic legal and social exclusion. It's important to note that prior to 1978, the Indonesian Identity Card (*Kartu Tanda Penduduk/KTP*) did not include a column for religious affiliation (Bagir et al. 2015; Maarif 2017, 2018).

Following the conclusion of the New Order and the onset of the reformation era, the state began to acknowledge *Kepercayaan*, although discrimination continued, particularly at the social and cultural levels. The issue of the status of *Kejawen* and other indigenous religions and beliefs, collectively referred to as *Kepercayaan*, will be explored in more detail in subsequent journal articles.

#### **D. Conclusion**

The exploration into the discrimination against *Kejawen* and other indigenous belief systems in Indonesia, particularly within the legal and social framework, illuminates the deep-seated bias ingrained in the distinction between "religion" and "belief." This bias, largely stemming from a Western conception of religion, has marginalized *Kejawen* and similar faiths, relegating them to a status perceived as inferior to recognized world religions. The critical discourse analysis conducted in this study reveals the complex interplay between religious, social, and political forces that perpetuate this marginalization, despite Indonesia's constitutional promise of religious freedom and equality. The historical overview demonstrates the fluctuating political and social standing of *Kejawen*, from periods of significant influence to times of harsh discrimination, particularly under the guise of anti-communist sentiments. The state's narrow definition of religion, influenced by Western models and the cultural hegemony of Islam, has systematically excluded indigenous beliefs from the sphere of recognized religions, affecting their legal rights and social recognition.

Despite efforts by *Kejawen* practitioners to counteract this discrimination, challenges remain, primarily due to enduring biases and the institutional mechanisms designed to maintain the religious status quo. This study not only sheds light on the specific context of Indonesia but also contributes to the broader

discussion on the impact of colonial legacies and the imposition of Western religious paradigms on indigenous beliefs worldwide. Ultimately, there is a need to revise and expand the legal definitions of “religion” and “belief” within Indonesian law to include indigenous belief systems like *Kejawen*. This action would ensure that these faiths receive the same legal recognition and protection as other world religions, thereby promoting religious equality and freedom.

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