



BRILL

EXCHANGE 50 (2021) 238–269

EXCHANGE

brill.com/exch

Contextual Theology as Heritage Formation: Moluccan Culture, Christianity, and Identity

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Abstract

This article uses the case of Moluccan Protestantism to argue that contextual theology is not merely a postcolonial theological movement, but in some cases also can be understood as part of a larger post-independence political nation-building project of heritage formation. I show how in two key political periods the interests of the Moluccan Protestant church (GPM) and the Indonesian government coalesced. The word 'heritage' is central to the Moluccan contextual discourse, and the development of contextual theology resembles practices of heritage formation, being a controlled political process of careful selection of cultural forms, aimed at a sense of 'authentic' local identity. The development of a Moluccan contextual theology partakes in the socio-political effort of preservation of Moluccan cultural heritage. At the same time, and paradoxically, the heritage frame in which Moluccan contextual theology is embedded, also hinders the theological goal of contextualization. This article is based on anthropological research into Moluccan theology. Its innovative contribution and relevance lies in the interdisciplinary postcolonial perspective, that understands Moluccan contextual theology as both a theological exercise of inculturation and as a religious expression of Indonesia's heritage politics.

Keywords

Moluccan contextual theology – heritage formation – cultural identity – diversity – postcolonialism – preservation – post-independence nationalization

1 Introduction

At the theological university in Ambon (the Moluccas, Indonesia), *Universitas Kristen Indonesia Maluku* (UKIM), theologians are developing contextual theologies based on the current cultural context of Moluccan Christians.¹ This development is discursively framed as a postcolonial theological response to the history and legacy of more than three hundred years of Dutch colonial rule.

Many western and non-western societies are trying to come to terms with the dark pages of their histories as colonizer or colonized, yet religion is sometimes forgotten in debates about decolonization. In many parts of the world, Christianity was a colonial product because colonization facilitated the infrastructure for missionaries who set sail for the newly ‘discovered’ and conquered regions. Moluccan theologians, in common with many theologians elsewhere, are seeking to address this legacy of colonial Christianity, that – as is widely claimed – rejected local culture and demonized native religions.² John Parratt describes this quest as a search for an identity that is located in the traditions, cultures, and social worlds in which Christians live, and as a rejection of theological agendas that are set by the West.³

The development of Moluccan contextual theologies is often understood as part of a world-wide postcolonial movement (that started in the 1960s) that endeavors to disentangle Christian beliefs and practices from its colonial past and aims to develop theologies relevant to one’s own context. In this article, I argue that Moluccan contextual theologies should not merely be seen as a component of this global postcolonial movement within theology, but also as being prompted by recent (post-2000) political developments in Indonesia that celebrate cultural diversity and Indonesia’s cultural heritage. In Moluccan society particularly, these political developments translate into political efforts of ethnic revival and attempts to preserve local cultures. Contextual theology

1 This article is based on anthropological fieldwork in the Central Moluccas between October and December 2019. It draws on information and conclusions from my research master thesis at Utrecht University, *Traditional Tunes Transformed: The Resonances and Dissonances between Theology and Lived Religion in the Protestant Church on the Central Moluccas* (2020).

2 One should keep in mind that the image of western missionaries destroying local culture is often sketched to underline the locality of contextual theology in opposition to western theology. The history of colonial Christianity, however, is not a homogeneous story.

3 John Parratt, *An Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7. Third-world theology is a term that was introduced in the 80s and 90s. Nowadays it often is replaced by the term contextual theology that in turn consists of multiple strands, such as postcolonial theology, liberation theology, and inculturation theology.

is one of the instruments employed in the preservation of Moluccan culture, by means of voicing Christianity in terms of local identity.⁴

A central term in Moluccan contextual theology is heritage (*warisan*). The term heritage expresses concerns for theological decolonization as well as evokes connotations of a political project of cultural preservation. On the one hand, cultural heritage forms the source for theological contextualization and hereby decolonization; on the other hand, it refers to the broader societal aim of preservation of cultural traditions, including in the religious arena. Accordingly, heritage entangles these two considerations in the contextual discourse. Many Moluccan theologians link Moluccan identity with cultural heritage. Traditional Moluccan customs, for instance in the form of music, dance, language, clothing, ritual, and values, are explored, adapted, and transformed by Moluccan theologians to consciously construct expressions of religious life and practice that evoke recognition among Moluccan Christians and enable an identification as Christian and Moluccan simultaneously. The preservation of cultural heritage and the development of contextual theology are thus intricately interconnected.

This does not mean that the process of contextualization of theology only encompasses unambiguously positive attitudes toward the inclusion of Moluccan culture, or solely unambiguously negative attitudes toward the history of colonial Calvinism. The late musician and theologian Christian Izaak Tamaela stated that Moluccan theology means the enrichment of Christianity through the culture of Christianity's context (in this case the Moluccan context). By this he pointed out that the current attempts at the inculturation of Christianity occur in the entangled cultural and religious histories of the Moluccas.

Moluccan contextual theology intends to simultaneously counter a colonial legacy and attempts to consciously yet critically formulate the naturally practiced contextualization of Christianity in Moluccan culture over the past centuries. For their contextual theology Moluccan Protestant theologians draw on Dutch Reformed tradition, as well as the form, function, content, and context of their own cultural heritage. In the words of Tamaela: "it is part of the heritage on which Moluccan theology is built. (...) Contextualization means [the] continuation of what [Moluccan culture and Protestantism] you had before."⁵

4 Local identity here refers to geography. 'Local' points to a designated place or environment, in this case the Moluccas. Self-evidently, there exists enormous variety in the Moluccan area and local identity encompasses these differences in culture, traditions, and customs – differences that are still encapsulated by the overarching concept of local Moluccan identity.

5 Interview with Christian Izaak Tamaela (30-10-2019, Ambon). Unfortunately, Tamaela passed away in 2020.

Hence, the sources of contextualization are the religious as well as cultural heritage, including the legacy of colonial Calvinism; Moluccan culture, colonial Calvinism, and their centuries-long inevitable entanglement form the sources of Moluccan contextual theology. These sources are used to develop Moluccan theologies with the aim of influencing religious attitudes and practices 'on the ground', while it simultaneously intends to draw on religious life in practice. The goal is to ensure Moluccan identification by means of theological decolonization, contextualization, and preservation.

In this article I argue that it is no coincidence that Moluccan contextual theology is fashioned by both a postcolonial perspective and a politics of preservation through the heritagization of Protestant religion and Moluccan culture.⁶ Both contextual theology and heritage discourse can be understood as postcolonial responses to the perceived denigration and negation of native religion and culture in the colonial period. While the former is customarily addressed by the discipline of theology, the latter is often the subject of the discipline of anthropology.

This article, which is based on my own anthropological research into Moluccan theology, converges these two discussions. Its innovative contribution and relevance lies in the interdisciplinary postcolonial perspective, that understands Moluccan contextual theology as both a theological exercise of inculturation and as a theological expression of Indonesia's heritage politics. In this article, the case of Moluccan theology serves as a lens for a theoretical exploration of contextual theology as heritage formation. This conceptualization results in a broader understanding of and better insight in contextual theology. Often, contextual theology is merely seen as a movement within theology. However, in this article I show that contextual theology can also be analyzed as a religious dimension of a social-political movement of heritage formation. The analysis explores the parallel developments between the processes of contextual theology and heritage formation that took place in the national context of Indonesia, when in the aftermath of the shift from colonial rule to independence a highly diverse archipelago had to be conceptualized as one coherent and unified nation. The article also argues that the interpretation of contextual theology as heritage formation is applicable more broadly, as the emergence of both contextual theology and heritage politics can be explained by kindred contexts or shared characteristics of post-independent states, and their quest for a balance between unity and diversity.

6 I use the phrase 'politics of preservation' because the argument that I build in this article centers on contextual theology as part of the national, political project of heritage formation and preservation.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I will provide some general information about the religious history of the Moluccas. I will also clarify the key terms that I use in this article. Then, the theoretical frame of heritage formation is laid out and applied to the Indonesian context. After that, I discuss the rise of contextual theology in the Moluccas. The core of the article is formed by the analysis of the parallels between heritage formation and Moluccan contextual theology. The article ends with a conclusion that recaptures the central argument.

2 The Moluccas & Colonial Christianity

The Moluccas are situated in the east of Indonesia.⁷ Geographically the Moluccas can be divided into three areas, each of which have a distinct religious history: the North Moluccas are predominantly Muslim, the South Moluccas are predominantly Catholic, and the Central Moluccas are predominantly Protestant (consisting of the islands Ambon, Lease (Haruku, Saparua, Nusa Laut), Banda, Seram, and Buru).

The Moluccas occupy a unique position in the history of colonization and mission. These so-called ‘spice islands’ have attracted foreigners since the time immemorial. As the Jesuit Indonesia expert Adolf Heuken states, “The Moluccas would have remained a far out-of-the-way forgotten archipelago, if they had not been the only place in the world producing cloves, nutmeg, and mace.”⁸ Trade brought a variety of religious traditions to the Moluccas. Arab merchants, who transported spices to the Persian Gulf, introduced Islam on the Moluccas from the 15th century onward. In 1534 Portuguese traders brought Catholicism to the Moluccas, soon followed by Catholic missionaries.

The Dutch arrived on the scene in 1605 and the VOC, ‘the United East India Company’, was able to establish an, often-contested, trade monopoly. Although Dutch presence was largely motivated by the economic gain of the trade in

7 The Moluccas consist of a total surface area of 851,000 square kilometres, ninety percent of which is water. The distance between the most northern and most southern point is 1,300 kilometers. The Moluccas comprise of approximately 1,300 islands, many uninhabited. Dieter Bartels, *In de schaduw van de berg Nunusaku: een cultuur-historische verhandeling over de bevolking van de Midden-Molukken* (Landelijk Steunpunt Edukatie Molukkers, 1994), 17–18.

8 Heuken, Adolf, “Catholic Converts in the Moluccas, Minahasa, and Sangihe-Talau, 1512–1680,” (eds). In *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, edited by Jan Sihar Aritonang and Karel A. Steenbrink (Studies in Christian Mission, V. 35, Leiden: Brill, 2008), 25.

cloves and nutmeg – characterized by episodes of severe violence against the local population – along the way Reformed Christianity was introduced.⁹ The year 1605 marked the beginning of what would be more than three centuries of Dutch colonial rule over large parts of present-day Indonesia. The Central Moluccas, where the fieldwork for this article was conducted, occupy a special position in the history of Christianity in Indonesia. Heuken writes: “the Christians of Ambon and the neighboring Lease islands are the only Christian communities in the Moluccas that have survived without interruption to the present day.”¹⁰

The VOC was declared bankrupt in 1799. With regard to the history of Christianity in the region, the year 1815 marked the shift from chartered company mission to independent missionary societies, which aimed to develop a Moluccan Christianity modelled after Dutch Reformed Christianity.¹¹ The missionaries began to pursue a policy of purification of Moluccan Christianity (*agama Ambon* – localized Christianity as an Ambonese identity marker) from all cultural influences connected to pre-Christian religion.¹² The legacy of this endeavor to separate Moluccan foundational expressions from Christianity in the Moluccas – in particular the living reality of the ancestors – is still strong and remained a key concern, even after the Moluccan Protestant church (*Gereja Protestant Maluku* – GPM) became autonomous in 1935.

9 Verry Patty, *Molukse theologie in Nederland: Agama Nunusaku en bekering* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2018), 73, 77.

10 Heuken, “Catholic Converts,” 31.

11 The most renowned Protestant missionary in the Moluccas was Josef Kam (1769–1833), also known as the ‘Apostle of the Moluccas’. Josef Kam worked for the Dutch Missionary Society (*Nederlands Zendelingen Genootschap* – NZG). Kam organized the supply of Christian teachers, offered catechization lessons, and printed the Bible, psalm books, and Christian schoolbooks in Malay. He is famous for the introduction of bamboo flutes to accompany congregational singing. Patty, *Molukse theologie*, 86–90; Karel Steenbrink & Mesakh Tapilatu, “Moluccan Christianity in the 19th and 20th Century: Between Agama Ambon and Islam,” (eds). In *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, edited by Jan Sihar Aritonang & Karel Steenbrink (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 386–388.

12 Ambon was the administrative center of the Dutch spice trade. *Agama Ambon* does not literally refer to the geographical place of the island Ambon, but to the particular Central-Moluccan Protestant identity that developed in this area because of Dutch colonialism and missionization here. ‘Ambonese’ thus is a metonym. Patty, *Molukse theologie*, 57.

3 Clarification of Key Terms

3.1 *Contextual Theology*

UKIM has been a key place where theologians develop Moluccan contextual theologies. Although contextual theology is a broad term, referring to theological alignment with a variety of contexts (social, political, economic, etc.), Moluccan theologians interpreted contextual theology mainly to mean a theology of inculturation, which refers to the Moluccan cultural context. The reason for this is that Moluccan contextual theology is framed as an effort of decolonization of the Moluccan church – a decolonization that counters the anti-cultural character of the GPM in the past (both before and after they became autonomous). During the time of colonial rule, Dutch missionaries taught Moluccan Protestants that there was no place for Moluccan culture in the realm of the church, intending to prevent influences from native religion. In other words, missionaries separated culture from Christianity out of fear of so-called ‘syncretism’.¹³ After the Moluccan Protestant church became independent in 1935, due to the political climate, GPM policy intensified the anti-cultural attitude of colonial Christianity.¹⁴ It is against this background that Moluccan contextual theology originated. This does not mean that Moluccan theologians have disregarded contemporary political or social contexts. On the contrary, many young theologians have actively engaged with a variety of contemporary issues in Moluccan society to develop Moluccan theologies that are embedded in the contemporary life worlds on multiple levels. However, Moluccan contextual theology in general is conceived of as an effort to theologically situate Protestantism in Moluccan culture, because it originated as a postcolonial response to the denigration of local culture and religion.¹⁵ Moluccan contextual theology is thus conceptualized along these lines and the majority of Moluccan theologians also focus on inculturation. Within the frame of contextual theologies, I therefore characterize Moluccan

13 Evidently, the effort of the Dutch missionaries did not mean that a complete copy of the Dutch Reformed church was successfully transported to the Moluccas. Moreover, many missionaries themselves also worked from a Moluccan cultural perspective to convert locals and build the Protestant faith in the Moluccas. Hence, over the four centuries that Protestantism has been present in *Maluku*, a specific Moluccan Christianity has developed, which in itself should be seen as a kind of natural contextualization. Nevertheless, the fact that generations of Moluccan Protestants have heard that their culture should not interfere with their Christianity to prevent heretical mixtures forms the counterpoint against which Moluccan contextual theology is currently being developed.

14 See below for further explanation of this point.

15 Interviews with Chris Tamaela (30-10-2019, Ambon); Margaretha Hendriks (21-10-2019, Ambon); Steve Gaspersz (4-12-2019, Ambon). See also Patty, *Molukse theologie*.

contextual theology as both a theology of inculturation and as a (political) postcolonial theology.

As stated earlier, in this article I argue that Moluccan contextual theology should not only be understood as a postcolonial response within the church, but also as part of a broader political project of heritage preservation. The link between contextual theology and politics in the Moluccas is apparent on an organizational level. UKIM is the institution that provides education for theology students who, if they so choose, become the future pastors of the Moluccan Protestant church. The GPM has over 700 congregations that are scattered across innumerable islands over the whole area of *Maluku*. UKIM was established by the GPM in 1985 and is seen as the 'kitchen' of the GPM, where theologians 'cook', make, create, explore, and experiment with new theological ideas.

Through its relation with the GPM, UKIM is embedded in local, regional, and national political structures. In their own wording, the GPM and the local/regional government operate as partners,¹⁶ and UKIM thus is part of this network. The GPM feels a strong responsibility to inform the government about its vision, and aligns itself overtly and transparently with political policies. In turn, government officials publicly show support by attending religious activities organized by the GPM to stimulate interreligious relationships at a political level.¹⁷

The GPM always explicitly invites politicians to their assemblies to make sure that what the church wants for society is transparent and developed in communication with the government. The GPM feels a responsibility to present themselves as a peaceful post-conflict religious community (due to the religious conflict from 1999–2002 which will be addressed further in another paragraph below), and politicians want to enforce this ideal through balanced attendance. In this way church and politics affirm each other, which is also expressed in prevailing discursive themes, such as brotherhood. In their mutual affirmative relationship politicians are careful not to disturb interreligious connections, and the church in turn is careful not to violate political policies.

The close relations between these three 'elite' levels (UKIM, GPM, politicians) are visible in official educational, political, and religious events. For example, when an employee of UKIM got promoted and joined the board, a party was

16 Interview with the general secretary of the GPM (19-11-2019, Ambon) and informal conversation with the governor (19-10-2019, Tulehu).

17 Also, political positions are (tensely) divided between people of different religions. For example, when the mayor is Muslim, the vice-mayor should be Christian to prevent inequality with regard to positions of power and privilege.

held: typical white decorated chairs, round tables, plastic tents, fancy glasses, extensive buffets, and live music were enjoyed not only by UKIM staff, but also by representatives of the local government and GPM officials. Another event in which the closely entangled relations between church and government became visible was the earthquake on 26 September 2019. In the aftermath, the mayor called for public religious interdenominational services – led by representatives of different religions – to together pray for trust and recovery. Civil servants were obliged to attend these events, showing their support in their yellow-brown uniforms.¹⁸

Accordingly, the Moluccan contextual theology that theologians at UKIM develop is a Protestant contextual theology, primarily designed for use in the GPM but embedded in local, regional, and national politics. Although UKIM is definitely implicated in this network, they have more room for divergent voices and for critically assessing religious and political policy. Points of friction between UKIM and the GPM, for example, concern disability and LGBTQ rights, and perceived nepotism. UKIM is also critical about the symbiotic entanglements between the GPM and local politics, such as the fact that people working for the GPM simultaneously held a political office, and that the GPM at times supports political candidates. Nevertheless, connections between UKIM, GPM, and politics – and conjoined aims, policies, and effects – are strong, which especially becomes clear through the focus on Moluccan traditional culture: while UKIM theologizes on the basis of these cultural resources, the GPM seeks to implement this contextual approach in church, and the government stimulates and facilitates this cultural focus more generally through money, education, and the organization of performances.

3.2 *Heritage*

Another key term in this article is heritage. Anthropologists and religious studies scholars have theorized the relation between heritage and religion with the notion ‘heritage formation’. Heritage formation, according to Meyer and Van de Port, “denotes the processes whereby, out of the sheer infinite number of things, places and practices that have been handed down from the past, a selection is made that is qualified as a precious and irreplaceable resource, essential to personal and collective identity and necessary for self-respect.”¹⁹

18 In general, this religion/politics relation is expressed visually in the form of the national flag and the portraits of the president and vice-president hanging in almost every room where a religious activity takes place, and verbally in almost every sermon that addresses the smallest local context until the largest national context.

19 Meyer & Van de Port, *Sense and Essence*, 1.

In this light, the rise of discourses of heritage formation can be understood as a form of postcolonial response to the negation of native culture during times of colonization in many countries in the world. Nowadays, the affirmation and revival of cultural traditions and identities are effectuated through policies of preservation that aim to uphold cultural traditions that are seen as essential, invaluable sources of identity. These cultural traditions are increasingly called heritage. Thus, similar to contextual theology, heritage formation as a discursive regime can also be seen as having originated against a background of postcolonial cultural affirmation.

Although heritage refers to the past, heritage is not automatically and directly *inherited* from the past; heritage is the outcome of a selection of cultural forms that are canonized, while others are not selected. Thus, what is conceived as 'heritage' (and what not) is not just a given, but a construction.²⁰ In the same light, Lowenthal describes the way people "celebrate, expunge, contest and domesticate the past to serve present needs" as a process in which an inherited legacy is manipulated to secure it as heritage. Some aspects of the past are suppressed or condemned, whereas other aspects are foregrounded and become sanctified as heritage.²¹ Despite the reality of careful selection or construction, the appeal of cultural heritage partly lies in its pretense of not being constructed – "on its promise to provide an essential ground to social-cultural identities."²² At the same time, the process of heritage formation does not guarantee 'success', in the sense that the cultural forms that are singled out may be found lacking 'authenticity' and thus fail to be persuasive for the intended beholders.²³ Moreover, the process entails inevitable contestations, paradoxes, ironies, doubts, and tensions, which is why it is important to carefully consider the politics of authentication and the aesthetics of persuasion involved.²⁴

20 Birgit Meyer and Marleen De Witte, "Heritage and the sacred: introduction," *Material Religion* 9/3 (2013), 276, 280.

21 David Lowenthal, *The past is a foreign country-revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 21.

22 Meyer & Van de Port, *Sense and Essence*, 1.

23 Authenticity here means a successful sense of essential identification evoked by the selected cultural forms. I use the term authenticity in this article in reference to this literature on heritage.

24 Meyer & De Witte, "Heritage and the sacred," 276, 280.

Politics of authentication refers to the process through which heritage is authenticated and authorized in specific power constellations. Aesthetics of persuasion refers to the appropriation and embodiment of heritage in lived experience. Meyer & Van de Port, *Sense and Essence*, 6.

Processes of heritage formation can be understood as part of a contemporary (international) political movement to select and foreground particular cultural forms that express a sense of local identity which needs to be preserved. Scholars have noted an acceleration of heritage production in the contemporary world. This is to be seen in organizations like UNESCO that safeguard ‘world heritage’, in the arena of identity claims, and also in the religious field where certain forms and practices currently in decline have been recast as heritage. While heritage remains a rather vague term that is used in multiple instances, many cultural collectives are increasingly versed in heritage vocabularies – in the literature often referred to as ‘heritage regime’.²⁵ As Meyer and Van de Port argue, heritage has become a conceptual framework and a discursive realm to assess, evaluate, and act upon material and immaterial pieces of the past.²⁶

In Indonesia in general and in Moluccan society in particular such developments of heritage politics can also be observed (I will address this further in the next paragraph). Nowadays, Moluccan people refer to their cultural traditions through this term, because of perceived rapid changes under the forces of globalization. These changes instill the urge to prevent the loss of cultural heritage and therefore the preservation, maintenance, regeneration, and development of traditional culture. For example, one Moluccan pastor stated: “We don’t want that our *adat*, our culture, is slammed down by the millennial world. We want to combine it in order that society will live happily with their preserved culture which however is not closed off against contemporary developments and changes.”²⁷ People do not want these cultural forms to disappear, because they are heritage passed down from the Moluccan ancestors. They contain something unique – possessing cultural values that shape Moluccan identity. A musician said: “if it is not us, then who? That is the problem. Traditional things [go from] generation to generation, and if we count [one] missing chain, we are going to break the whole chain for the ancestors. (...) [It is about] preservation so we don’t lose our identity.”²⁸

25 In this article I use the phrase heritage regime in reference to this literature, that highlights the vocabularies and discursive regime of a heritage frame in which such processes of selection are voiced.

26 Meyer & Van de Port, *Sense and Essence*, 8, 11–12.

27 Interview with Anonymous (28-11-2019, Ambon). *Adat* is “the customary usage (i.e. religion, manners, cultural traditions, customs, social organization and rights) which has been handed down by the ancestors and which is passed on from generation to generation.” H.K. Hendrik, *Piring Natzar: De Waarde En Betekenis Van Een Oud Moluks Religieus Symbool in Een Geseculariseerde Wereld* (Utrecht: Moluks Theologisch Beraad, 1995), 18.

28 Interview with Anonymous (23-10-2019, Ambon).

Among Moluccans, heritage is thus defined on the basis of an understanding of cultural identity, the ancestral lineage, and threats of annihilation. Interestingly, linguistically, heritage, the ancestors, and preservation are also closely linked. *Warisan* means ‘legacy’ or ‘heritage’, and the verb *mewariskan* means ‘to pass down’ or ‘transmit’. Moluccans often refer to aspects of their culture (*budaya*) that they deem essential to Moluccan identity because it is an ‘inheritance’ from the ancestors. Therefore, these cultural aspects need to be preserved and revived. In Moluccan discourse the term and conceptualization of heritage lie naturally close to inheritance of culture that is passed on by the ancestors. Although culture and heritage are not the same, they are used together frequently and considered interconnected since they operate in the same linguistic and discursive realm. *Budaya* for Moluccans seems to refer to local culture as a whole, whereas *warisan* refers to these aspects of culture that are deemed invaluable for Moluccan identity because they are part of an ancestral chain. In a sense, *warisan* is a selection of culture that must necessarily be preserved in the eyes of Moluccan people.

4 Diversity & Heritage in Independent Indonesia

Indonesia has a complex history with regard to cultural politics. Dutch colonial rule ended in 1942 when Japanese forces occupied the Dutch Indies during the Second World War. On 17 August 1945, days after the Japanese capitulation, Soekarno and Hatta declared Indonesia independent. A bloody war followed, in which the Netherlands tried to reclaim its colony. Under UN pressure, a decolonization process was started in 1949. However, discontent among a faction of the Moluccans, who had high hopes of Indonesia becoming a federalist state rather than a republic, led to the declaration of the RMS, the *Republik Maluku Selatan* or the Republic of the South Moluccas, on 25 April 1950.²⁹ Though the struggle for independence was suppressed by the Indonesian government, for some the RMS continues to be a political ideal. However, the RMS

29 Decolonization brought many Moluccan KNIL-soldiers (the Royal Dutch Indian Army) into a difficult position. Out of fear for retaliation of the Indonesian republic, many did not want to join the Republican army nor demobilize themselves on Indonesian soil. On the other hand, the Indonesian republic did not want the soldiers to support the declared RMS, which led to the decision of the Dutch government to bring these soldiers with their families (12,500 people) to the Netherlands to discharge them. The intended temporary stay appeared to be an illusion: this year seventy years of residence of the Moluccans is being commemorated in the Netherlands. H.V. Amersfoort, “The waxing and waning of a diaspora: Moluccans in the Netherlands, 1950–2002,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30/1 (2004), 155.

never became a political reality. The Indonesian army arrived shortly after and already in December the RMS-government retracted to the island Seram. The Moluccas have thus always formed part of the Indonesian Republic.³⁰

The Indonesian state ideology is called 'Pancasila', the five points of righteousness. The first president of Indonesia was Sukarno, who reigned from 1951 to 1967. The national motto, 'Unity in Diversity', was established with the Declaration of Independence, and aimed to underscore the congruence underlying the astonishing variety of peoples and cultures within the nation's borders. As Indonesia scholar Patricia Spyer observes, this motto targets the diversity as an affair of the state. The motto represented a national process of selecting certain aspects of that diversity that were to denote the whole of Indonesian culture, tradition, and custom, hereby imposing a standard upon difference. Diversity thus became a codification, even a prescription, cast as manifestation of a shared-underlying unity.³¹

Under Sukarno cultural expression became a central political instrument to promote certain visions of the nation and its culture. An example were the so-called cultural missions sent overseas in the 1950s and 1960s to show 'national confidence and pride'. Hence, when Indonesia became independent the creation of a national culture for the new nation was a prime political goal.³²

The second president, Suharto, reigned from 1967 to 1998. Suharto's New Order regime was characterized by Indonesian centralization, which effectively meant 'Javanization': Javanese culture was projected and imposed as Indonesian culture.³³ The 'trickle down' paradigm prioritized Java and stigmatized people further from what was considered the cultural and political center.³⁴ To realize this, Suharto instituted a nation-wide program of top-down economic and social development, and cultural activity was controlled and centralized by the state. Regional or local culture had to be upgraded ('modernized' and hereby homogenized), imbued with values of development, "to

30 For more information about the background of the declaration of the RMS and its effects, see Richard Chauvel, *Nationalists, Soldiers and Separatists* (Leiden, KITLV Press, 1990). For more information about the Moluccan diaspora in the Netherlands, see Henk Smeets & Fridus Steijlen, *In Nederland gebleven: De geschiedenis van Molukkers 1951–2006* (Amsterdam & Utrecht: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker/Moluks Historisch Museum, 2006).

31 Patricia Spyer, "Diversity with a Difference: Adat and the New Order in Aru (Eastern Indonesia)," *Cultural Anthropology* 11/1 (1996), 25–26.

32 Barbara Hatley, "Introduction: Performance in Contemporary Indonesia – Surveying the Scene," (eds). In *Performing contemporary Indonesia: celebrating identity, constructing community*, edited by Barbara Hatley, Brett Hough, and Yoshi Fajar Kresno Murti (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1.

33 Bartels, *In de schaduw van de berg*, 33.

34 For example, in Java many people believe Moluccans are from Papua and associate their relatively darker skin color with bad habits.

give safe, a-political expression to regionality within the framework of the unified nation, in keeping with the regime's construct of idealized Indonesian citizenship."³⁵ The effects are well-known and resented by many Moluccans, who continue to feel disadvantaged up to today. Moreover, the policy of *transmigrasi* – resettlement of Javanese farmers in, among other places, the Moluccas, that aimed at relieving economic pressure in densely populated areas on Java – caused frustration among the Moluccans, whose land was expropriated. They felt that the central government wanted to destroy their *adat* in order to impose a uniform national culture.³⁶

Spyer asserts that the transformations which are brought about by the construction of a unifying framework can become sites of confrontation, especially in places far removed from the capital, such as the Moluccas. She contends that under President Suharto Moluccan *adat* was colonized once more: the domain to which *adat* was deemed relevant shrank, because it was redefined to codify highly limited aspects of 'traditional' socio-cultural life.³⁷ These assumptions about *adat* were inherited from the Dutch colonial state, that used *adat* as a connotation of local, bounded cultures to distinguish and purify culture from religion.³⁸

Half a century of political regimes of nationalization seem to have achieved the intended result. Today, the younger generation of Moluccans no longer has living memories of a colonial past, nor of the RMS, and is schooled with pan-Indonesian nationalist ideas. Almost all Moluccans identify themselves as Indonesian, while being proud of their Moluccan identity as well.³⁹

During the last two decades, however, there appears to be a revival of interest in Moluccan traditional culture; this is also related to changes in political policy. After 1998, electoral democracy was implemented, restrictions on political parties were removed, and the independent media started flourishing. Regimes after Suharto, the current president Joko Widodo included, have encouraged a focus on the local identities of Indonesia's sub-cultures. Centralized power made way for self-managing autonomy and authority of Indonesian regions, which have ignited a sense of 'original' local identity. This introduction of a regional autonomous political system aims at decentralization. It forms a

35 Hatley, "Introduction," 2.

36 Bartels, *In de schaduw van de berg*, 33.

37 Spyer explains how *adat* retained the broad application it had under Dutch colonial rule, when the term was used as a "gloss for the allegedly immutable cultural forms that are held to distinguish one collectivity (...) from another".

Spyer, "Diversity with a Difference," 26, 28, 33.

38 Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2007), 104–105.

39 Bartels, *In de Schaduw van de berg*, 288–289.

sharp contrast to the previous central authoritarian regime that prescribed ideological values and cultural expression in constructing a national identity. Nowadays, the cultivation and funding of culture is determined at the local level. The focus in the Moluccas seems to be on local cultural distinctiveness, for instance through festivals and art events.⁴⁰ At school Moluccan children have started to learn about their local culture, language, dance, and more; the so-called bamboo festival (comprising a variety of arts related to the local material and wisdom of bamboo or *bulu*) is organized annually; and young urban creators affirm their ethnic identity in relation with global influences and collaborations.⁴¹

A prominent example of actors that partake in this societal revival of ethnic identity are musicians. Many music groups consisting of children have been established to regenerate indigenous musical knowledge and skill. Strikingly, the reasons for establishing the groups are similar. With their group the musicians intend to promote, develop, and preserve traditional Moluccan instruments, in order to prevent their extinction. One musician from the village Amahusu, who leads a very large and successful ukulele group consisting of children from various ages, backgrounds, and religions, said that he wants to preserve the instrument and hereby Moluccan culture. Another musician from Tiouw on Saparua, who teaches his group of children many different Moluccan traditional instruments, also stated that he wants to preserve the traditional music culture that otherwise disappears. Both of them refer to the object of preservation – Moluccan traditional music – with the term *warisan*.⁴² Again it becomes clear how heritage, Moluccan culture, and preservation are entangled in a discursive network.

Such music groups perform their repertoire during various occasions. They play in organized music events, in church, out of social initiatives, for traditional village ceremonies, for guests or tourists, and during events commissioned by the government, some even in international settings. With financial subsidies the music group then represents Moluccan musical culture to fellow Moluccans, people from other regions of Indonesia, or even to people from other countries. An example was a concert in the village Tuni on Ambon of the now

40 Hatley, "Introduction," 4.

The Moluccas are administratively managed on various local levels (islands and regions) as well as on one central Moluccan regional level. The Moluccas show enormous cultural diversity, which means that local governments work with their specific cultural traditions.

41 For instance, young musicians create hip-hop music that is inspired both by ethnic forms of speech, poetry, and music, and by international musical influences.

42 Interviews with Anonymous (25-11-2019, Amahusu; 6-12-2019, Tiouw).

nationally and internationally renowned Moluccan Bamboo Orchestra (MBO). The group consists of more than sixty young people who play the *suling*, a horizontal flute made of bamboo.⁴³ In an amphitheater of sand the audience – including many governmental delegates – experienced a spectacular musical and theatrical piece about *Maluku's* nature and traditions, played by traditional instruments mixed with modern compositions.

The involvement of politicians in the promotion of traditional music is thus very visible in the public sphere. The local and even national government commissions performances of traditional Moluccan music which allows traditional music groups to travel to and play their music in a variety of local, regional, national and international places. In turn, when a music event is organized somewhere in the city, a delegation of local politicians is always present to demonstrate support.⁴⁴

These examples make it clear how the current governmental focus on cultural diversity translates into financed cultural programs through which local culture, in this case Moluccan music, is shown to society and beyond as one of the unique ethnicities that Indonesia has. Politically regulated processes of application and selection organize the display of Indonesia's cultural diversity in the form of opportunity and money. These chosen cultural initiatives show Moluccan ethnic heritage to the world. In other words, cultural diversity turns into the showcasing of cultural heritage through political management: the politics of heritagization.

The described shift from centralization to autonomy, from unity to diversity, is not unique to Indonesia alone. In many nations that moved from colonial

43 This instrument actually originated in church and was introduced by the missionary Josef Kam, who sought musical accompaniment to congregational singing by means of locally available natural materials. Nowadays, the instrument has moved beyond the church and is seen as a Moluccan traditional instrument.

44 An additional example was an art show performed by many different school classes in Ambon City. Representatives from the local government, including the mayor who opened the event, were part of the audience. Other programs (among others) that stimulate Moluccan music are: a program that encourages high school students to set up bands, establishing an annual inter-school competition for them; the Musicians Visitation Program – a mentoring program in which experienced musicians, playing traditional instruments, visit the surrounding villages around Ambon and perform masterclasses for local musicians, for whom the main instrument is a traditional one; and the *Taman Budaya* Concert Building, which seats up to 800 spectators. Also, young, creative artists who are part of Ambon's music scene visit schools to teach music to children. This program is called 'GSMS'; *gerakkan seniman masuk sekolah*, movement of artists entering schools.

suppression to postcolonial independence, the room for accommodation of the many diverse cultures within the artificially created national boundaries only occurred after a sense of national identity had been forged.⁴⁵ The cultural politics of Sukarno and Suharto, focused on national culture and censored diversity, must be seen within this particular political and historical momentum. Moreover, in the Moluccas specifically, the declaration of the RMS posed a genuine risk for the national project of Indonesia, and therefore, in the perception of the Indonesian government, formed an additional factor for the suppression of Moluccan ethnic and cultural identity. Currently, with the RMS being a political ideal of the past, and with the successful establishment of Indonesia's national consciousness, a new phase of regional autonomy offers opportunities for local diversity.

Important to bear in mind, however, is that the legroom for diversity is not isolated from, but rather firmly embedded in political policy. Though cultural diversity is no longer seen as a political threat to the nation state, it is still managed politically (as explained above), for instance in terms of available money, definition and selection of cultural folklore, local relations, and international display. It is in this light that heritage has once more become implicated in politics.

An example of the political construction of heritage in the Moluccas is the accession of Ambon City in October 2019 on the UNESCO list of the 'Creative Cities Network' as a City of Music. Together with the local government, other local partners and organizations, musicians, and the church, the Ambon Music Office (AMO) strategized to become a *kota musik dunia* from 2011 onward, organizing many events, festivals, and conferences. Traditional or ethnic Moluccan music is one type of music that is emphasized especially because this is the unique 'selling point' of music in Ambon that cannot be found somewhere else. Within the scheme of UNESCO, Moluccan traditional music is framed as heritage, that needs to be preserved because it is part of Moluccan identity. Also, AMO promoted, with reference to the specific Moluccan history of religious conflict in the 1990s, music as a tool of peace and conflict reconciliation as their unique point of branding (see next paragraph).

The examples in *Maluku* suggest that the political shift towards regional autonomy and cultural diversity is increasingly framed in terms of heritage

45 See, for example: Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007); Michael Akuupa, "We can be united, but we are different': discourses of difference in postcolonial Namibia," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 33/3-4 (2010), 103-113.

formation.⁴⁶ Whereas during the New Order regime *adat* was severely constrained and censored, nowadays local identity increasingly figures as what Spyer has called “a disappearing past” (Spyer 2000, 8), which needs to be protected and preserved, because it is perceived as ‘Moluccan heritage’.⁴⁷ Following the example of traditional music, in Moluccan society many different actors refer to the importance of working with traditional cultural forms and reviving Moluccan music to contribute to the preservation of Moluccan heritage. This preservation is deemed necessary because of forces of globalization that cause rapid change and almost unconsciously make people lose touch with their cultural heritage.⁴⁸ In response, people feel that traditional instruments and styles of singing, among other cultural forms, should not disappear. These musical traditions come from the ancestors and therefore form part of Moluccan identity which is the reason they have to be reproduced. Therefore, both in popular music scenes, in political regulations, and in church, traditional music has been revived so that younger generations become acquainted again with these types of music and start to develop them. Theologians, musicians, politicians, church officials, pastors, and also congregants speak in this same manner about the preservation of musical and cultural heritage.

5 Conflict & Contextualization

In this article I contend that within this national frame that moved from centralization to decentralization, the Moluccan Protestant church, through

46 Although the regimes under Sukarno and Suharto were also characterized by political processes of cultural selection (that however offered no room for cultural diversity) that resemble processes of heritage formation – as I will explain further on in the article – the difference is the absent link with cultural preservation; these centralized regimes were solely focused on national unification. Current political policies that focus on local diversity aim at the preservation and regeneration of ancestral cultural traditions, recast as heritage, that are deemed invaluable for people’s identity in light of rapid global change.

47 *Adat* features prominently in Moluccans’ idea of an inclusive ethnic identity, that transcends religious boundaries between Moluccan Christians and Muslims because they share their common culture. Moving through consecutive political regimes of unity, development, and diversity, the current heritagization or ‘nostalgic recovery’ of *adat* or Moluccan culture bears the mark of the current time. Moreover, the commitment to inclusivity is a common theme in this celebration of diversity voiced in terms of heritage, that in the religiously plural Moluccas is played out on the relational level between Muslims and Christians. Spyer, “Diversity with a Difference,” 27–28; Patricia Spyer, *The memory of Trade: Modernity’s Entanglements on an Eastern Indonesian Island* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2000), 8, 31–32; Hatley, “Introduction,” 14–17.

48 Interviews with Anonymous (11-11-2019, Ambon).

the development of contextual theology, is aligned to the political project of Indonesia. The interests of both the Indonesian government and the GPM coincide in the two phases of unity and diversity regarding their attitude towards local culture. Church and government have been partners in both the past cultural purification and homogenization (Javanization/modernization) and the current renewed focus on traditional heritage and diversity.⁴⁹ The general secretary of the GPM confirmed this in stating that the Moluccan church has to adapt and has adapted to political regimes in serving the people: being part of Indonesia is a key element of the ecclesiological basis of the GPM.⁵⁰

When Indonesia became independent, the GPM tried to adapt to and build their church system in a national context. They consciously distanced themselves from RMS ideals. It was as part of this process that the GPM pursued a (renewed) policy of purification of Protestantism from the 1960s onward, aiming at eradicating *adat* and ancestor worship. The basis for this effort was a document called *pesan tobat*, literally 'message of repentance'. During its 1960 synod meeting the GPM called for a reformation of the church. Everything that could not directly be related to scripture was labelled 'pagan'. The church's aim was to break with Moluccan cultural traditions and form a central part of national Indonesian society.⁵¹ The theological idea that drove this, was that, freed from cultural influence, one could become a 'pure' Christian.

While in a way the *pesan tobat* absolutized the view of the Dutch missionaries on native culture and religion, it simultaneously symbolized the aspiration of the GPM to play a role in the nation-building of Indonesia by manifesting themselves as 'modern Christians' without a (backward, cultural) past and ancestors.⁵² Henceforth, the cultural purification of the GPM coincided with the moment in which the newly-established nation was striving for unity (in which there was no place for the RMS), an undertaking to which the GPM needed to relate.⁵³

49 It is important to add that the idea of 'partners' was stressed by the GPM board. Especially considering the RMS past, as well as the religious conflict in 1999 (see next pages), the GPM feels that it is highly important to align itself with political policy and portray a peaceful and cooperative image of itself as religious institution. In reality we must bear in mind that the GPM has to obey the government and therefore has no unlimited freedom to relate itself in certain ways to political ideals.

50 Interview with Anonymous (19-11-2019, Ambon).

51 Patty, *Molukse theologie*, 157; Elizabeth Marantika et al., *Delapan Dekade GPM: Teologi GPM dalam Praksis Berbangsa dan Bermasyarakat* (Salatiga & Ambon: Statya Wacana University Press/Gereja Protestan Maluku, 2015).

52 Patty, *Molukse theologie*, 157.

53 Furthermore, the church leaders of the GPM, though autonomous since 1935, had been educated with an intolerant stance toward local culture, in line with the views of Dutch

In comparison with the global rise of contextual theology in the 1960s, theology in the Moluccas adopted this new direction relatively late. Moluccan contextual theology only started to blossom after 2000. The long-lasting effects of the anti-cultural stance of colonial Christianity and the *pesan tobat* can probably be identified as the main reasons why this did not occur earlier.⁵⁴ During the seventies several south-east Asian meetings took place which flagged that western theology did not represent people in other contexts. Through these pan-Asian exchanges, theologians at UKIM became inspired by Asian contextual theologians from the '90s onward. For a long time theology in the Moluccas had been dominated by western thinkers like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, or Herman Bavinck; now Asian and Indonesian writers also began to be incorporated in curricula of theological seminaries.

In 1997 the seminar *Injil dan Kebudayaan*, Gospel and Culture, took place in the village Amahusu, which many Dutch and Dutch-Moluccan Protestant theologians and pastors attended. Its aim was to normalize the relations between Moluccan churches in Indonesia and in the Netherlands.⁵⁵ The meeting started off with an explosion of conflicting opinions between Dutch-Moluccan and Moluccan perspectives. While the *Moluks Theologisch Beraad* (MTB) in the Netherlands had acknowledged their Christianity as Moluccan people through a reconsideration of the position of the ancestors, in Amahusu they were accused of 'reviving paganism': with the *pesan tobat* Moluccan Christians had buried *adat* and their ancestors, now professing a 'pure Christianity'. However,

missionaries. The leaders institutionalized this view out of respect for their religious ancestors. I may even suggest that this continuation of missionary views is related to the importance of respect for the ancestors in Moluccan culture. Other authors (i.e. Bartels, *In de schaduw van de berg*) already stated that Moluccan Christianity has a formalistic character that can be traced to the cultural practice of strictly adhering to *adat* rules to prevent punishment from the ancestors. In this light, Christianity became implicated in this system of rules. People that had been raised and educated with certain perspectives on native religion and culture regenerated the views of their religious ancestors.

54 In comparison with other places in the world where Christianity was adopted in times of colonial rule, the Moluccas have known an exceptionally long and uninterrupted history of colonial Christianity.

55 The largest Moluccan Protestant denomination in the Netherlands is the GIM, the *Geredja Indjili Maluku*, that was established on a pro-RMS political basis. A smaller denomination is the NGPMB (*Noodgemeente Protestant Maluku di Belanda*) that affiliates themselves with the GPM in the Moluccas, but forms an independent church organization. Representatives from the GPM, GIM, and NGPMB, as well as Dutch, Dutch-Moluccan, and Moluccan Protestant theologians were present at this seminar that had been prepared by the *Moluks Theologisch Beraad* (MTB) in the Netherlands. The latter formed a group of Dutch-Moluccan Protestant theologians and pastors who wanted to distance the Moluccan church from a colonial theology that did not tolerate Moluccan culture.

gradually, as the week continued, tension was replaced by mutual interest and understanding. The participants found each other in the same question of identity: to which extent can one be both fully Moluccan *and* fully Christian? Open workshops and lectures showed similarities despite the differences, and inspired by the Dutch-Moluccan theology, the GPM began to reconsider the power and pride of Moluccan culture.⁵⁶ In retrospect, Moluccan theologians have designated the seminar as the starting point for an earnest Moluccan contextual approach, with cultural sources beginning to play a role in Christian theology.

The religious conflict in the Moluccas from 1999 to 2002 intensified this contextual shift. In hindsight, some theologians feel that perhaps the diminution of indigenous values (a consequence of colonialism, GPM policy, and nationalist politics) was one of the causes of the bloody civil war between Christians and Muslims. Interestingly, religion was not the initial cause of this *kerusuhan* (unrest – the term Moluccans use to refer to the conflict). Economic, political, and social disputes paved the way for increased tensions that created the possibility of a civil war, which only later became framed in religious terms. The religious violence resulted in the deaths of thousands of people and many displacements. People were killed with home-made and primitive weapons in very sadistic ways, and mosques, churches, houses, and whole villages were burnt to the ground.⁵⁷

The conflict made clear that context could no longer be theologically ignored, as it fully manifested itself in the form of innumerable violent cruelties. A colonial exclusivist theology proved untenable in a pluralist Moluccan society where Christians and Muslims live next to each other.⁵⁸ Now more than ever, there was a need for a contextual theology of harmony based on shared culture. Theologian Margaretha Hendriks explained:

In the heat of the real Moluccan fight, when blood was all over, we needed another perspective. I think that is how we confess Christ in a

56 Patty, *Molukse theologie*, 152–158.

57 For more information about the causes of the religious conflict, see Lucien van Liere & Elizabeth van Dis, “Post-War Reflections on the Ambon War: Causes, Justifications and Miracles in Christian and Muslim Narratives,” *Exchange* 47/4 (2018), 372–399; Lucien van Liere, “Fighting for Jesus on Ambon: Interpreting Religious Representations of Violent Conflict,” *Exchange* 40 (2011), 322–335; Jacques Bertrand, “Legacies of the Authoritarian Past: Religious Violence in Indonesia’s Moluccan Islands,” *Pacific Affairs* 75/1 (2002), 57–85.

58 This exclusivist theology consists of the idea that only Christians hold the absolute truth and will be saved.

new way. Contextual theology starts from our real context and experience. (...) To me God is so great, you cannot define God in only one way or the other. God is kind of a mystery, you see? So we need to broaden our vision, broaden our understanding, broaden our experience of God. By also learning from each other. To me it is like that.⁵⁹

It is important to note that this does not mean that the exclusivist Protestant theology was the root cause of the religious conflict. Rather, the colonial legacy that had produced Christian privilege and Muslim marginalization was an important aspect that provided the ground for a framing of the conflict in religious terms: a theology that pictured the religious other as an unsaved heathen seemed to reinforce this. However, social, economic, and political circumstances ignited the conflict, and the contextual shift must, among others, be seen as a response to the violence. Moluccan contextual theology therefore also developed as a reaction to a pressing violent context, out of the realization that theologians could and should help rebuild a Moluccan society based on interreligious harmony.

Therefore, after 2000 various changes in theological education and church were gradually implemented. At UKIM courses were adjusted, and contextual theology became an independent subject. Also, churches began to experiment with different cultural liturgical forms – leading to the 2018 synod decision to establish the ‘ethnic service’. The development of contextual theology at UKIM now moves at a quick pace, with ongoing attempts at shaping and contextualizing belief by drawing on Moluccan cultural richness.⁶⁰

It was not only the *kerusuhan* that led to the realization that contextual theology was necessary. At the very same moment in time the political shift from nationalization to decentralization occurred. I argue it is no coincidence that Moluccan contextual theology started to blossom after the year 2000, when regional autonomy made allowances for local diversity. Where in the 1960s the GPM participated in the political project of nationalization through censorship of local culture, after 2000 the interest and openness of the Moluccan church to a theology of inculturation can also be understood as in line with the national political policy on diversity. These cohering political and religious processes are characterized by strategies of selection and at times orchestrated

59 Interview with Margaretha Hendriks (21-10-2019, Ambon).

60 Moluccan contextual theology was inspired by and developed in response to broader international, especially Asian, theological thinkers who began advocating for a contextual approach. Examples are the Ghanaian Kwame Bediako, the Taiwanese Shoki Coe, and the American Stephen Bevans.

processes through a frame of heritage formation. In other words, not an uncritical attitude of 'anything goes', but rather a selective choice for cultural forms that politically and theologically are deemed appropriate to express diversity and contextuality characterize these processes. Such cultural forms are framed as heritage.

6 Moluccan Theology and Heritage Formation

The theology of inculturation as practiced by Moluccan theologians is characterized by selection, adaptation, and transformation. In discourse, process, implementation, and reception there are various parallels between Moluccan theology and heritage formation. Both the processes of heritage formation and contextual theology select certain cultural forms on the basis of specific criteria. Both search for an acceptable compromise; heritage formation balances between cultural tradition and national union, whereas inculturation theology balances contextual Christian expressions based on cultural tradition and universal Christian belonging. Moreover, the intention of preservation that lies behind the politics of heritagization also forms the interpretative framework for the reception of Moluccan contextual theology. Since the latter can be considered as an expression of the political project of heritage formation, its practical results are understood by congregants in terms of preservation, rather than contextualization.

In the development of contextual theology, Moluccan culture is not uncritically and directly transposed from the past to the present, from tradition to church, but accommodated through a conscious and filtered process, and hereby transformed and even produced. Additionally, Moluccan theology develops in relation with contemporary political, social, cultural, and religious contexts, and therefore stimulates an ongoing process of reflection and change. As theologian Steve Gaspersz said: "My belief is not a final belief. I think our theology or our faith is challenged by our changing context. (...) How as a Moluccan, Indonesian Christian to contextualize? How to face the new challenging context in postcolonial Indonesia, in modern society inside the paradigm of our government, and in post-conflict *Maluku*?"⁶¹

The Moluccan traditions that serve as resources for contextualization are often referred to as 'cultural symbols'. Developing a Moluccan contextual theology involves a critical attitude towards these sources, selecting 'good' aspects and developing new meanings in a contemporary context. Generally speaking,

61 Interview with Steve Gaspersz (4-12-2019, Ambon).

the basis for the process of contextualization is Moluccan culture (i.e. traditions and customs), also referred to as *adat*, situated in the holistic here and now. This means that in the contextual dialectic between Christian faith and *adat* something new originates. Values from *adat* and Christianity are brought together, and in this process scripture and social-cultural context (including contemporary culture) are also taken into account. For instance, *sopi* is a popular traditional alcoholic drink that is prohibited by the church and government because it causes drunkenness and problems. However, seen from an *adat* perspective, *sopi* is an instrument of mediation and a symbol of union and peace. Through a transformation of this traditional practice in reference to Christian religion, the positive idea and value behind *sopi* can be used in theology, for example to convey a message of peace through the sermon. Another example pertains to Moluccan traditional instruments that can be theologized as instruments to invite God's presence into church, instead of instruments to summon the ancestors.

Notwithstanding the idea that contextual theology should be based on the religious practice of everyday life, the impetus of this Moluccan theological movement seems to be top-down and developed by theologians rather than the lived practice of church members. Moluccan contextual theology has opted for a specific direction of adaptation and transformation: *adat* values have to be compatible with Christian values, so that the *adat* practice can be incorporated into Moluccan Christianity. Moluccan theologians have adopted a critical attitude to judge the good and destructive aspects of traditional culture. Positive aspects are deemed to be those that align with Christianity and can be used, whereas negative aspects, that are deemed incompatible with Christian faith, have to be discarded or transformed. Theologian Hendriks stated: "we have traditional culture, and it is part of our make-up, but some of it is good, and some of it is bad."⁶² Certain cultural values, such as helping each other, sharing, love, and brotherhood, are values which are also taught by the church. Therefore, these cultural values can support and strengthen the church's teachings. In this way, there is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and Moluccan culture. Other cultural aspects, however, that contradict values respected in the church and Bible cannot be accepted. For example, traditional practices associated with other transcendental powers than God, such as incantations that invoke the ancestors with the ritualistic purpose of killing an enemy, are absolutely banned from church. Moreover, traditions associated with discrimination, inequality between men and women, drunkenness, and violence or murder are regarded as negative. As one pastor stated: "There

62 Interview with Margaretha Hendriks.

definitely needs to be a strong filter, in order that not all things from culture end up in the service.”⁶³ There also are cultural sources that are currently discussed among theologians at UKIM as to whether they can or cannot be used in church.⁶⁴ Ultimately, the key point surrounding appropriateness and possibilities for selection and transformation of cultural forms is focused on how such a form can be theologized, hereby becoming a symbol. For example, while the *parang*, the Moluccan machete, and the *cakalele* dance are traditionally associated with war, they can be reconceptualized theologically afresh and hereby transformed into a welcoming and protective symbol. Contextualization thus is about substance and customizing. An informant summarized the process of contextualization in the following way:

A lot of culture and local wisdom is in accordance with the values of the Gospel. This we have to keep and preserve so that our culture permanently lives. Sometimes there are also things which do not go together with our religion. These we have to remove. Now we have to land Christianity in our soil, in our hearts, in order that Christian religion becomes our religion.⁶⁵

In this quote the most prevalent terms in the discourse on contextualizing Moluccan culture are summarized. It demonstrates how contextualization in the Moluccan Protestant church works according to a specific selection process, as unbridled contextualization is deemed to lead to syncretism and/or heresy.

This conscious process of theological selection, that foregrounds some aspects of culture and discards others, I argue, shows remarkable similarities to the political process of heritage formation. Building on anthropological studies on religion and heritage, I therefore theorize Moluccan contextual theology not merely as a theological endeavor but also as heritage formation. As stated in the introduction, in the Moluccan discourse on contextual theology select items of traditional culture are often referred to as heritage. Furthermore, the selective theological process of foregrounding certain traditional items from the Moluccan context while disregarding others, shares many characteristics with heritage formation. Traditional culture, handed down from the past, is selected on the basis of its approved value – its accordance with Christian

63 Interview with Anonymous (21-11-2019, Ambon).

64 An example is the wearing of the red headband, the *ikat kepala*, by a pastor in church. Some theologians think this practice is too strongly associated with native religion and ancestral powers, breaking with the habit of wearing black clothes without any accessories, whereas other theologians see it as a positive symbol from Moluccan culture.

65 Interview with Anonymous (6-12-2019, Saparua).

doctrine – and transformed to fit a Protestant theological frame and a liturgical church context, with the ultimate aim of creating an ‘authentic’ Moluccan Protestant identity. Traditional customs are elevated to the status of cultural heritage, stripped from dangerous interpretative potential, such as divisive, ‘pagan’, or maligning features, and hereby, what André Bakker (see below) calls, secularized and neutralized.⁶⁶ This is necessary to ensure identification by a larger group of people. Despite the conscious selection and transformation of traditional cultural forms, these traditions are believed and felt to be ‘authentic’ pillars of a collective Moluccan ethnic *and* Christian identity.

The Moluccan theologians I interviewed emphasize the controlled way in which cultural sources are transformed, although at times discussions have arisen on the question of boundaries – to determine which sources are qualified for transformation – as well as how to theologically adopt and transform such sources. These boundary contestations typically revolve around traditional practices associated with transcendental powers other than God – especially, the spirits of the Moluccan ancestors. These spirits constitute a potential danger to the necessarily ‘harmless’ cultural forms that challenge the core criterium of Christian orthodoxy, which is that God is the only transcendental entity whom one should worship.

The concerns some theologians voice are reminiscent of the research findings of André Bakker, who conducted research among the Pataxó Indians (converting to Pentecostalism). The heritagization of culture and the past bears broader theoretical relevance here. Bakker found that a careful discerning of which elements of the past can be brought in tune with Christian identity and which elements jeopardize this project is cast along the lines of harmless, non-spiritual culture among the Pataxó Indians. These harmless, non-spiritual elements are encouraged as legitimate sources of ethnic pride and affective attachment. Conversely, elements that carry any association with traditional spiritual forces and their potential presence are frowned upon. Bakker calls this ‘a project of disenchantment of cultural form’: “the stripping of certain materials made to feature as culture from their potentially sacred entanglements.” According to Bakker, this process of heritage formation and its blurry edges with sacred matters is perceived to be beset by constant danger, suspicion, hesitancy, and watchfulness because of the ever-present lying-under-the-surface possibility of evoking something else than intended: rather than

66 Secularized here refers to the stripping of any association with native religion. André Bakker, “Shapes of ‘culture’ and the sacred surplus: heritage formation and Pentecostal conversion among the Pataxó Indians in Brazil,” *Material Religion* 9/3 (2013). In the Moluccan case, in other words, the selected forms are conceptualized as Moluccan culture only, which is a source of theological contextualization.

merely celebrating ethnic identity, cultural engagement can cross the line into the sacred register of ritual invocation of ancestral spirits.⁶⁷ These potential 'deviations' into ancestral worship reveal how both contextual theology and heritage formation are a tricky, vulnerable business.

In sum, a central concern in Moluccan theology is how a particular cultural form which shows 'potential' for selection, transformation, and where relevant secularization, can be theologized in such a way that it becomes compatible with the Christian faith. This process resembles the steps of selection, adaptation, disenchantment, and transformation of culture that also are apparent in the formation of heritage. The goal of both projects is the construction of authenticity (religiously or nationally) by appealing to and evoking a sense of collective ethnic identity.

7 The Politics of Preservation

Up to this point the article has argued that both the discourse and the development of Moluccan contextual theology share certain characteristics with heritage formation. Additionally, also the practices of implementation and the attitudes of reception can be analyzed through a heritage perspective.

The theological motivation of a contextual approach aims to locate theology within the Moluccan Christian experience. At the same time, as explained above, I consider Moluccan contextual theology to be embedded in a broader societal and political revival of local identity. Nowadays, Moluccan society recognizes a need of preservation of Moluccan cultural identity and voices this through a heritage regime. The church thus is one of the contexts where this quest for Moluccan culture and identity becomes visible. Theologians feel Moluccan cultural traditions need to be revived and transformed to become part of the here and now, and to bring people in contact with the roots of their identity. For example, theologian Steve Gaspersz explained how in his role as a pastor he sometimes uses the Moluccan term *mena muria* (readiness) as a contextual substitution for *syalom*. Although originally the term is a war cry and was used during the fight of the RMS for independence, Steve Gaspersz theologizes this term to denote the spirit of contextual reform. He stated that for him the term indicates modest beginnings from which Moluccan Christians can explore their cultural heritage to find their religious-cultural identity.⁶⁸

67 André Bakker, "Shapes of 'culture,'" 307, 317–318, 320, 322–324.

68 Interview with Steve Gaspersz. Although *mena muria* therefore is a sensitive term, because of its historical associations to the RMS, Steve Gaspersz contextualizes it in his

The often-used term ‘preservation’ intersects heritage and theology discourses and shows how the process of contextual theology is entangled in the political focus on diversity that is authorized through processes of heritagization. The implementation of Moluccan contextual theology, namely, besides embedding Christian religion more deeply in Moluccan culture, will ideally lead to the preservation of the traditional forms that have been reconceptualized and set apart as cultural heritage. For instance, theologian Chris Tamaela developed contextual worship services by using traditional Moluccan music in church. He composed new spiritual songs and made new traditional instruments, inspired by Moluccan traditional culture, because he did not merely want to preserve the traditions as musical heritage, but also revive Moluccan tradition for the next generation. He said: “only the beauty of the cultural heritage that deals with the divine ancestors can shape worship, allowing Moluccan Christians to profess their religion from their own ethnicity.”⁶⁹

The ultimate goal of theological contextualization is ‘self-theologizing’ on the basis of cultural identity among Moluccan Christians in the congregations themselves.⁷⁰ However, at the moment this aspect of contextualization, namely the congregational process of inculturation on the level of theology, is still rare. Whereas one can say the contextual approach has become popular among Moluccan Christians – appreciation of cultural forms is rapidly becoming an accepted part of religion, while some time ago this would have been forbidden territory – the majority of church members does not see a deep *theological* connection between Christianity and culture. It shows how Dutch Calvinist and GPM doctrines of cultural purification have become ingrained in Moluccan Protestantism, and form part of the religious history and identity of Moluccans. Although many Moluccan Christians enjoy cultural elements

sermon in another way. Whereas *syalom* is a foreign word, *mena muria* is a Moluccan word, with a specific Moluccan history. Steve Gaspersz theologically transforms the term on the basis of its Moluccanness.

69 Informal conversation with Chris Tamaela (21-12-2019, Ambon).

70 I call this ‘self-theologizing’ to refer to a process in which also non-theologically trained Moluccan Christians begin to express their faith in terms of cultural identity. The vision of Moluccan theologians and the GPM is that ultimately Moluccan protestants should be able to theologize, conceive of, and live their Christian faith in terms of Moluccan culture. Whereas at the moment Moluccan contextual theology is largely still an academic endeavor that is implemented in GPM churches, the hope for the future is that Moluccan congregants will be able to automatically practice contextual theology in their lives. An ambiguity becomes visible here, since on the one hand Moluccan contextual theology is a selective, orchestrated process with set boundaries to prevent (perceived) ‘syncretism’, while on the other hand the ultimate goal is contextualization as natural part of faith and practice among congregants themselves.

in church services, theologizing one's God image based on the cultural context is perceived as much harder and risky as it touches the core of belief and religious upbringing – and therefore, religious identity; to reiterate the words of Margaretha Hendriks, “Changing your view on God is difficult. It is very difficult. (...) Thinking deeply about faith is a different thing.”⁷¹

The use of traditional instruments during the newly established ethnic service can serve as an example. When I referred to traditional instruments that are sometimes used in church (such as the Moluccan *tifa* drum), many congregants stated it was important to use these to preserve Moluccan culture. One congregant in the *Maranatha* church in Ambon City, for instance, expressed the following statement about the ethnic service: “I think it is very good, so that children who are still small and growing up can know and recognize traditional music, which is an inheritance from their forefathers, so that our culture does not disappear but still exists and survives or can become even better.”⁷² In this sense, the GPM is seen to have awakened Moluccan cultural life in worship, which teaches people “to get to know their identity again”, and “to remember their language, culture, and local wisdom.”⁷³ So, the stimulation of the ethnic service with traditional church music in particular is situated in a discursive network connected to (heritage) preservation. Hence, traditional church music was more linked to preservation than to theological thinking and the relation between culture and Christianity.

The majority of the Moluccan congregants thus appreciates contextualized worship services on what one could call a ‘superficial’ level (from the point of view of the Moluccan theologians). Congregants enjoy inculturation as one of the ways to organize worship, but still have reservations (regarding ‘syncretic’ dangers) or little affinity with the contextual approach when it comes to consciously theologizing identity on the basis of a contextual perspective which links culture and Christianity. Most congregants see contextualization mainly as an effort of cultural preservation. In other words, they conceive of contextual theology in terms of a project of cultural preservation, instead of a theological project of contextualization.

During the fieldwork I asked congregants about their experiences of the ethnic service, as this is the most obvious context where contextual theology is practically implemented. When pastors spoke for their congregants, they stated that people enjoy the ethnic service, that they feel proud, and that they better understand the sermon message. To a great extent this is true. It seems that many congregants appreciated the ethnic service; many referred

71 Interview with Margaretha Hendriks.

72 Interview with Anonymous (1-12-2019, Ambon).

73 Interview with Anonymous (11-12-2019, Ambon).

to the importance of it in the regeneration and preservation of Moluccan culture. However, people did not see a profound relation between culture and Christianity, and regarded the ethnic service merely as just another form to praise God. Some congregants did not recognize the service as 'ethnic', let alone that they experience the ethnic service in a fundamentally different way. This became clear when I asked people if their church already had done an ethnic service. One time, a congregant said yes, and when I continued asking about how that looked like, she referred to the service we just experienced, which actually was a regular Sunday service. Another time a man said no and was immediately interrupted by the pastor who was present, correcting the other man's statement and explaining to him that this was the time when they wore different clothes. It demonstrated that the concept of the 'ethnic service' had different meanings for different informants – meanings which did not necessarily align with the self-theologizing intentions of Moluccan theologians and their contextual theologies.

Echoing observations by Bakker, the reason for this reception is attitudes towards the ancestors. During the colonial times, Christian missionaries relegated the Moluccan ancestors to the realm of culture, prohibiting the belief in the powers of ancestral spirits. By this practice, which was further strengthened and institutionalized by means of the *pesan tobat*, they imposed a separation between Christian religion and Moluccan culture: since in Moluccan cosmology the ancestors formed the central entity in life as a whole, anything cultural was banished from church.⁷⁴ The effects of this semiotic regime are strong. Moluccan Christians make a distinction between appreciating or respecting the ancestors, which is allowed, and worshipping the ancestors, which is not allowed. In other words, the missionary goal of Christian conversion went hand in hand with countering – what in the missionaries' eyes constituted – paganism, of which ancestor worship was seen as the core. Therefore, a boundary was imposed to suppress native religion: between the religious realm of Christianity where one should only worship God, and the Moluccan cultural realm where one could merely respect the ancestors. Exactly this makes the implementation of contextual theology such a major shift. Moluccan Christianity is being re-theologized on the basis of identity, which means that culture enters church. This process is precarious, because for many Moluccan Christians aspects of culture are connected to ancestral veneration. Even more so, whereas in contextual theology culture and religion are central terms, it appears that for the greater part of Moluccans these are not terms in which one thinks or speaks. The theological idea-level

74 In practice and in the private sphere the separation is much less clear. However, in discourse and in official religious contexts the separation is often very much maintained.

and discourse thus do not correlate with religious attitudes in practice. This does not mean that congregants do not accept cultural forms in church. Most people relate to this development in another way, embedding it in the broader societal discourse of preservation and heritage instead of contextual theology. In that sense, people view the culture-Christianity relation through the recognition of Moluccan traditions and identity in church but refer to the religious context as a place of preservation. The discourse of preservation is much safer, because theologically the two spaces of culture and Christianity stay separate: people do not start believing in a different way through their cultural identity but appreciate the opportunity to express their cultural identity in church.

In sum, the implementation of Moluccan contextual theology is embedded in the political diversity project voiced through a heritage regime. Thus, I have argued, Moluccan contextual theology is a religious expression of the broader movement of the preservation of Moluccan cultural identity. At the same time, the majority of Moluccan congregants experiences contextualization as the preservation of Moluccan cultural heritage that may be enjoyed in church, rather than as a profound theological connection between Moluccan culture and Christianity. The ultimate theological goal thus is partly undermined by its partaking in the politics of preservation of Moluccan heritage.

8 Conclusion

In this article I have demonstrated the entanglement of the twin projects of contextual theology and heritage formation in the case of Moluccan Protestantism. I have situated the emergence of Moluccan contextual theology at the theological university in Ambon, UKIM, in the religious background of the Moluccas, and in the changing political contexts of post-independent Indonesia, shifting from national unity to room for diversity. I have also shown how the interests of the GPM and the Indonesian government coalesced in two central political periods; the shift from an emphasis on purification to a focus on inculturation demonstrates the theological adaptation of the Moluccan church to consecutive national political regimes.

Anthropological theory on heritage and religion has served as a lens to analyze the discourse, process, practice, and reception of the Moluccan contextual approach, with the aim to build a theoretical viewpoint on heritage and theology. Through flagging various parallel processes, I have argued that contextual theology can be understood as one particular expression of heritage formation.

The word 'heritage' is central to the Moluccan contextual discourse, and the development of contextual theology resembles practices of heritage formation, being a controlled political process of careful selection of cultural forms, aimed at a sense of authentic local identity. Moreover, the implementation of the development of Moluccan contextual theologies partakes in the socio-political effort of preservation of Moluccan cultural heritage. At the same time, the heritage frame in which Moluccan contextual theology is embedded seems to hamper and prevent the ultimate goal of contextual theologians, which is self-theologizing congregations. Although many Moluccans enjoy and appreciate the respect for culture in church, the majority of Moluccan Christians is not inclined to recognize the profound relation between culture and Christianity on a theological level, but rather recognizes the renewed appreciation of culture through the discursive regime of preservation and heritage. The latter mode of reception sits more comfortably with deep-seated distrust of syncretism and persisting trusted religious attitudes on the separation between Christianity and culture – effects of the religious history of colonial Christianity and the *pesan tobat*.

Concluding, by means of the Moluccan case, I have argued that contextual theology is not merely a postcolonial theological movement, but also needs to be understood as part of a larger post-independence political nation-building project of heritage formation. I maintain that the Moluccan case addressed in this article demonstrates the analytical value of conceiving contextual theology as a form of heritage formation. This conceptualization has potential and is relevant because both processes are driven by a postcolonial reaction. The Moluccan case not only shows the parallels between contextual theology and heritage formation, but also showcases the productivity of intersecting the disciplines of theology, religious studies, and anthropology, by analyzing contextual theology not merely as a postcolonial theological response to a political past, but also as an expression of contemporary political and societal forces – in this case heritage formation.

Thus, based on the Moluccan case, I assert that contextual theology should not merely be seen as a postcolonial theological movement, but also as a religio-political movement of heritage formation. This perspective helps to gain new insights on the intricate workings of the practices and processes of both contextual theology and heritage formation, which remain underexposed if each is analyzed within its own domain. Correlating approaches to theology and heritage broadens the picture and not only sheds light on analyses of cultural diversity in political-religious terms, but also diversifies analyses of religion, theology, and heritage.