

Missions and omissions of the supernatural: Indigenous cosmologies and the legitimisation of 'religion' in Indonesia

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The term 'supernatural' has a widespread use in popular parlance, and is posed as a universal analytic category in many anthropology textbooks (e.g., Haviland 2000; Lehmann & Myers 2001:1–5). This usage continues despite arguments that the term is ethnocentric and predisposes Western-trained scholars to assume a dualistic universe where it may not exist (Durkheim 1915; Hallowell 1960:28; Horton 1973:262; Lévy-Bruhl 1936:5; Lienhardt 1961:28). If a natural/supernatural division of the universe is taken for granted, investigators may intuit 'non-natural' domains and beings, even among people for whom the interventions of ancestors or deities in daily life are normal, usually explainable, perceptible, or ontologically 'real' events. I contested the term's presentation as a universal analytic category following field research among Sulawesi peoples with ancestral traditions, and comparative research on other non-Western cosmologies (Aragon 2000). Yet the term is necessary to describe most forms of Christianity or Islam, and their ideological influences worldwide. My discussion here concerns how to realign the 'supernatural' and related categories in the anthropology of religion to their most appropriate applications.

Klass (1995:28–32) suggests that the ethnographic term 'supernatural' be expunged from anthropology's folk terminology. Saler (1977, 1993:122–125) suggests that its use be reframed, keeping in mind its post-Aquinian Christian genealogy, and clarifying the concept's semantic vagaries. As a rhetorical strategy, I am sympathetic to Klass's call for abolition. Yet Saler's position is preferable as a research strategy appropriate to all ethnographic cases, as well as modernising states' political pressures on natives to 'rationalise' their religions. The 'supernatural' category also seems useful to Western observers to explain their perceptions of 'non-natural', 'non-scientific', or 'impossible' cosmologies to one another. The term's employment just should not misrepresent indigenous understandings of religious practices that entail an alternative view of the self, or relationships to deceased kin and environments.

The problems smuggled in with the term 'supernatural' are manifold. It has been used with imprecise and shifting referents, variously describing what is

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seen as 'inexplicable', 'non-natural', 'extraordinary', 'imaginary', 'transcendent', and even simply 'religious' by observers *or* informants, this last distinction often being unspecified. If the term is to be analytically useful, scholars must clarify exactly what is meant, and for whom (Saler 1993:124–125). I am not challenging all analytic use of inherited or binary Western categories, only ethnographically or politically unconsidered applications.

Researchers' perspectives on the 'supernatural' affect how they portray empirical reality (the 'natural') and social practice. The assumption of a natural/supernatural division of the world is often tied to a positivist definition of religion that is the mere remainder of science, science being the current state of knowledge according to systematic methods of observation. Some researchers see their informants' cosmological ideas as scientifically impossible, and hence 'supernatural'. Thus religious entities become formulated as indexing the limitation of our own or others' empirical knowledge. This view of the supernatural, as beginning at the point where empirical knowledge fails, is related to early anthropological views of magic, such as those of Tylor and Frazer (see Glucklich 1997:9, 32–38). It continues to pervade many anthropological teachings about religion, such as those of Haviland (2000:691), as well as the more sophisticated cognitive theory proposed by Guthrie (1980, 1993). By contrast, the issue of anthropologists' judgment about other religions' empirical reality is surpassed (or improperly bypassed, depending on one's perspective) by writers such as Evans-Pritchard (1937) and Geertz (1973:87–125).

My argument is against neither science as a useful way of knowing nor the use of scientific methods for studying ideologies such as those usually classified under the rubric of 'religion'. Rather, I seek to keep contemporary modernist ideologies, or tacitly theological ones, from prejudging the boundaries of all religions. Both science and religion concern orderly forces in the universe, but religions also provide interrelated moral perspectives that claim to transcend living human authority. They further designate how community members should behave towards non-human entities and one another through institutionalised practices such as rituals. Only a too narrow, doctrinal view of 'religion' confuses it with science, despite their potentially overlapping areas of concern.

Many anthropologists reject others' cosmological ideas as empirically impossible, yet accept them as symbolically or culturally 'true' for the native. I am inclined to go one step further and consider the unverifiable ideas of all cosmologies as inherently 'undecidable'. Yet, even empathetic investigations of the 'supernatural' often focus on detached ideas, such as a 'belief in witches', to the exclusion of the way these ideas and associated practices are formulated in response to particular historical and political events (Asad 1993). In other words, research on religion and the 'supernatural' should not take a synchronic and 'intellectualist' or cognitive approach, to the neglect of an equally important historical, practice-centred approach.

As Saler's (1977) historical genealogy of the category makes evident, 'supernatural' is an inherited Christian theological term with a range of disparate implications. It therefore begs for systematic 'reform' if it is to be 'saved' as a productive cross-cultural descriptive or analytic category. English vocabulary concerning 'religion' is full of such pitfalls, including the terms 'sacred', 'soul', 'belief', and even 'religion' itself (Aragon 2002a; Fitzgerald 2000; Hick 1989; Needham 1972; Smith 1978). Thus, semantic work is inevitable for any rigorous theory of religion or similar 'cultural domains'.

Both Fitzgerald (2000) and Smith (1998) suggest, albeit in different ways, that there is a clear ideological and political agenda to definitions of the term 'religion' and its auxiliaries, such as 'supernatural'. For Fitzgerald, the conceptual space of 'religion' had to be constructed by colonial Europeans in order to create its complement, the 'secular' or 'objective' place where capitalism could thrive. His solution is to eliminate the terms 'supernatural' and 'religion'. Smith, too, demonstrates that the concept of 'religion' and the idea of its universality are historical European constructions. Unlike Fitzgerald, however, Smith concludes that 'religion' is an anthropological rather than a theological category, and is still useful for scholars as a generic concept that establishes a 'disciplinary horizon'. In a recent paper (Aragon 2002a), I agree with Smith, and use 'religion' broadly without prejudging its exact constituent features (Salter 1993). I then use 'supernatural' only for cases in which people actively make some binary distinction with a 'natural' world, both poles being defined, at least by the observer.

Below, I use ethnographic examples from Sulawesi to show where the supernatural/natural distinction misled Europeans trying to understand and portray a precolonial Indonesian cosmology. Such preconceptions also impeded missionaries in Sulawesi from fully apprehending the postcolonial Protestantism they worked to create. Additionally, Protestant-influenced definitions of 'religion' imposed by the colonial Dutch government were adopted by the independent Republic of Indonesia (1945–present), with the result that all indigenous cosmologies were classified as illegitimate 'non-religions'. Complying with historical political pressures, almost all Indonesian citizens today affiliate with an imported religion, whose tenets are different from those of their ancestral heritage and sometimes continuing worldviews.

Where the 'supernatural' category misunderstands monistic ontologies

The word 'supernatural' is usually defined as an order of existence operating by principles distinct from entities in the observable world. Some definitions also note that the supernatural entails what is extraordinary, mysterious, or unexplainable (Norbeck 1961:11), implying the intervention of a transcendent deity.¹ The distinction does not suit many small-scale and popular religious practices worldwide that are monistic, meaning that the world is uniform in

operating principles or substance. Many examples of this type of cosmology have been described with the labels 'animism' and 'animatism'.

The term 'animatism' refers to religious ideas about impersonal forces that can enter and leave different entities in the universe. The Polynesian concept of *mana* is the classic example (Keesing 1984). By contrast, 'animism', in the meaning given it by Tylor (1871), describes religions in which 'natural beings possess their own spiritual principles and [humans] establish with these entities personal relations of a certain kind—relations of protection, seduction, hostility, alliance, or exchange of services' (Descola 1992:114).

Bird-David (1999) remarks that animist practices appear to many Westerners as a 'failed epistemology', ensconced in the realm of the 'supernatural', tainted by 'weak rationality' and 'poor science'. By contrast, she and other anthropologists argue that what such cosmologies do from a performative standpoint is establish, between a human community and other elements in the environment, naturalistic relationships that operate by a common set of principles. Such cosmologies are ontologically uniform, or monistic, although some beings are more powerful than others, and there may be unseen or unknown aspects to the recognised beings and entities (Bird-David 1999; Descola 1992:114; Kopytoff 1971; Roseman 1990).

Before Dutch colonial intervention in the early 1900s, the social world of Tobaku highlanders in Central Sulawesi included recently deceased relatives (*kiu*), deified ancestors (*anitu*), spirit 'owners' (*pue*) of resources such as land, and dangerous beings in the forest (*seta*) who were best avoided or appeased with offerings (Aragon 2000, in press).² These beings, however, were not usually mysterious to Sulawesi people. Villagers could explain their basic habits, specify the human transgressions that elicited retribution, and note empirical signs (sounds, sightings) of their perceived existence. When misfortunes occurred, people usually had a good idea what was amiss, and who had erred. If there was any doubt, a religious specialist (*tobalia*) was asked to intercede and determine the causes and solutions. In short, while dead relatives and 'owners' of the land were recognised as different in their abilities from living villagers, they were not seen as transcendent (one Western connotation of 'supernatural') but, rather, immanent and interactive in a seamless cosmos.³

In the pre-Christian Tobaku cosmology, many powerful entities are understood the way we understand the moon's periodic invisibility. Even though the moon often cannot be seen by day, we still know it is there. Additionally, beings that appear differently to Tobaku people under different circumstances are analogous to our understandings of chameleons, or caterpillars and butterflies, which appear variously according to environment or during different life stages. For example, angry ancestors in Central Sulawesi can appear as rats and consume an entire crop planted by their descendants who transgress ancestral rules of behaviour. The transformation of living relatives into ancestor spirits into rats is

never portrayed as miraculous or 'not natural'; rather, these transformations are the way of the universe. In short, the natural vs. supernatural distinction corresponds to no indigenous categories in the Tobaku area or, probably, in the entire Indonesian region.

Missionary omissions in Central Sulawesi

By contrast, the term 'supernatural' has a necessary analytic place in any historical discussion of Sulawesi peoples' Protestant conversion and portrayal in the Dutch colonial era. The distinction between a natural world, subject to Western scientific rules and technology—especially with regard to agriculture—and a distinct supernatural world, ruled by a transcendent God, was a conceptual abstraction that missionaries sought to teach their colonial subjects (Aragon 2000; see also Keane 1997). European missionaries saw themselves as replacing a false, even Satanic, vision of the transcendent supernatural with a beneficent and correct one. In many respects, the missionaries and their local disciples were successful: the highlanders of Central Sulawesi today are overwhelmingly Protestant in a nation that is approximately 87 per cent Muslim. Yet, while highlanders' religious identities are thoroughly Christian, and most rituals follow formulaic Protestant formats, their cosmology continues to be guided by its monistic tradition rather than by the imported dualistic one that divides the universe into 'natural' and 'supernatural' domains (Aragon 2000:18, 28–29). Under European tutelage, Sulawesi highlanders learned about God, Jesus, and Satan. All the deities they had known from their ancestors became reclassified as subsidiary and subservient to these imported categories of deity.

God, however, was understood to punish people for exactly the same land-use violations, adultery, acts of disrespect, or stolen heirlooms as his predecessors. From a pragmatic social standpoint, God had to enforce customary rules similar to those long used by these communities to assert leadership and maintain internal social order with minimal state or institutional oversight. When families did not closely supervise their members, the same transgressions were thought to result in the same 'natural' results for the communities: illness, crop failures, floods, or accidental deaths. The indigenous owner deities or ancestors, viewed by some as vassals of the Protestant God, often delivered these retributions.

The missionaries, to the extent that they noticed these deviations from their own perspectives, saw a deficient absorption of Protestant teachings and a latent clinging to 'supernatural' superstition. I suggest, instead, that the postcolonial Protestantism of Central Sulawesi largely preserved the social norms, economics, and monism of the indigenous epistemological universe, such that God was conceived within the 'natural' cosmological rules. God acts like the ancestors because he is constrained within the same universe as they are. Most Sulawesi highlanders did not adopt the Aquinian view that God alone commands a

unique power of 'surpassing effects' or miraculous intervention (Saler 1977:47), the strong theological definition of 'supernatural'.

Although it did not achieve general currency among Tobaku highlanders, an Abrahamic theological perspective about the supernatural, in its acceptable and unacceptable forms, did enter Indonesian national discourse through the post-Independence (1945) government's official category of 'religion' (*agama*, Indonesian). All Indonesians have been required to identify themselves, on documents such as citizen identity cards and school registration forms, with one of five authorised scriptural religions: Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, or Buddhism. These religions have been placed in opposition to illegitimate 'superstitions' or 'beliefs' (*kepercayaan*), a category used by the government to describe almost all indigenous religions of the archipelago.⁴ As a result, some ethnic minority or 'tribal' groups have recast or 'rationalised' their own cosmologies to make them match official 'religions' more closely (Atkinson 1983). Other ethnic minorities, however, simply converted to an authorised religion and now portray indigenous practices as part of the 'non-religious', 'non-supernatural' categories of 'tradition' (*adat*) or 'regional arts' (*kesenian daerah*), which are permitted and supported by the government (Aragon 1996, 2000).

Categorising narratives of violence in contemporary Indonesia

Recent events of communal violence and their religious exegesis in Indonesia have led me to rethink possible applications for the term 'supernatural'. Indonesia has been in a severe financial and political crisis since late 1997. In May 1998, the crisis led to the resignation of President Suharto, who had ruled Indonesia with an aggressive military force since 1965. The Suharto regime's tactics imposed widespread inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace, but at the price of suppressed discontent that found an outlet in religious organisations, often ones with ethnic coherence. In the wake of Suharto's resignation, there have been occurrences of communal violence in widely scattered islands of the Indonesian archipelago. Some of this violence has been secessionist in intent, as in East Timor, Aceh, and West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya). Some has been aimed at ethnic Chinese, who manage a disproportionate percentage of private commerce. Many regional conflicts have polarised multi-ethnic communities into Christian and Muslim factions. In Central Sulawesi, Muslim-Christian violence began in the Poso District during December 1998 and still continues (Aragon 2001, 2002b; Human Rights Watch 2002).

When I conversed with Central Sulawesi Protestants in July 2000, they often gave scriptural justifications or analogies for why one group attacked another, or for why one group 'triumphed' over another during a particular phase of the conflicts. This was not surprising, as Protestants in the region have long been encouraged by both foreign and local ministers to see outcomes as emanations

of 'God's Will'. Rather than seeing God's hand as 'supernatural' in the miraculous sense, however, I found most narratives to be congruent with locals' naturalistic view of cosmological justice at work in the world. According to Western missionary teachings, God is supernaturally omnipotent and performs miracles. Some theologically trained indigenous ministers echo this idea of God's 'supernatural' or 'surpassing' effects (Saler 1977). Most Tobaku, however, described God's acts as being in accordance with the way the immanent powers of the universe always cope with human transgressions. For them, God, like the ancestors, exists within a monistic universe and has the power and responsibility for overseeing just outcomes, much like living parents and community elders.

In a now classic article, Anderson (1972) describes the Javanese view of power (*kesaktèn*, Javanese) as amoral, homogeneous in type and source, constant in quantity (although not in distribution) in the world, and concrete, meaning that it exists independently of its users and suffuses all matter in the universe. Javanese and other Indonesian 'animatistic' cosmologies do not divide the world into 'natural' and 'supernatural' spheres of power, following different rules or derived from different origins. Even the generic Indonesian word for knowledge, *ilmu*, borrowed from Arabic, refers equally to technology or science *and* to mystical religious or magical knowledge.

Some elements of Sulawesi conflict narratives were (to me) uncanny in the transcendent sense of 'supernatural', such as alleged meetings between politicians and ancestral figures, or a jacket that was said for a time to provide one Christian renegade with invulnerability. Yet the 'magic' was conceived by the narrator simply as within the realm of many powerful 'natural' forces that she did not command. Such narratives bear illocutionary force in a contemporary Indonesian political arena, one that seeks justice in a monistic universe experiencing social turmoil. Recent Indonesian data suggest that, in cases of monistic cosmologies, use of the supernatural category requires caution because it may incorrectly describe local experience.⁵ Where Christian and Muslim influence prevails, the category is inherently a facet of intellectual history and can be useful to analyse discrepancies or slippage in religious thought and practice. Care just needs to be exercised regarding whether events Westerners might view as 'supernatural' are defined locally as miraculous in a transcendent sense, or merely extraordinary in a world full of extraordinary possibilities. These cautions represent a middle ground for 'reform and salvation' of the supernatural category, such that this medieval word will serve our data's current analyses rather than the other way around.⁶

NOTES

1. *The compact edition of the Oxford English dictionary* (1981:3163) specifies transcendence as follows: '1. That is above nature; belonging to a higher realm or system than that of

nature; transcending the powers or ordinary course of nature. 2. More than the natural or ordinary; unnaturally or extraordinarily great; abnormal, extraordinary.' *Webster's New World dictionary of the American language* (1980:1429) first emphasises something that is merely beyond the knowledge of humans: '1. Existing or occurring outside the normal experience or knowledge of man; not explainable by the known forces or laws of nature; specif. of, involving, or attributed to God or a god.' There is a subtle difference between a separate order of transcendence, a common Western view, and an unusual condition that may be affected by a powerful being who is *within the single order of existence*, which I am suggesting is the customary Sulawesi perspective.

2. While some data here apply more generally to other areas of Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, and beyond, the specific area being discussed is the Tobaku region of the Kulawi District where the Uma language is spoken.

3. On the distinction between transcendent 'supernatural' and immanent (monistic) perspectives in cosmology, see Saler (1993:50–51).

4. In a few cases, indigenous religions have been classified under the rubric of a world religion accepted by the Indonesian government. For example, with local lobbying efforts, the ancestral cosmology of Kalimantan (Borneo) called *kaharingan* became classified as a form of Hinduism (Schiller 1997).

5. For another example, how could 'supernatural' as an analytic category be useful to understand Daoism?

6. Good models for the project of renovating loaded religious terms such as 'supernatural' include efforts to examine the term 'shaman' critically (Kehoe 2000), and revitalisation of the term 'syncretism' (Stewart & Shaw 1994), despite some remaining difficulties (Aragon 2000: 44–46).

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