

# **BUTONESE CULTURE AND THE GOSPEL (A CASE STUDY)**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a preliminary survey of Butonese culture and the gospel. It begins to address the boundaries, and make up of identity, for the Butonese people of Indonesia, and begins to suggest possibilities for a culturally-appropriate communication of the gospel to Butonese people. In the form of questions, what I want to do is ask, “What is central to Butonese ethnicity and identity? What does it mean to be Butonese? How might the gospel interact with Butonese culture? What might an indigenous Butonese church look like?” The Butonese people in southeast Sulawesi are centrally located in Indonesia, right between the hot spots of Ambon, Timor, and Kalimantan. They seem to have avoided the conflicts that divide neighbouring groups, though violence and refugees have recently spread to their island as well. There are more than 300,000 Butonese on the island of Buton. They are a beautiful, friendly people, almost all of them confessing Muslims. These reflections on Butonese culture and the gospel will hopefully be relevant to Melanesian believers, whom the Master Fisherman may call west to Indonesia, or who may be living and working among groups of a similar background.

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## **1. ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY**

Ethnicity and identity are important issues in Indonesia, with its hundreds of different ethnic groups. Sadly, violence has often occurred, and is currently occurring, across ethnic lines. Understanding ethnicity and identity is worthy of investigation, because of its relevance to the preservation of peace, as well as the preservation of cultural diversity. In heaven, people from all different people groups will be worshipping God, and God wants people from all people groups worshipping him here. Part of the beauty of heaven, then, and the church in the meantime, is the cultural diversity of our worship. I want us to look at an observation of those things that are important to Butonese, in particular their political traditions (of the sultanate), their religion (Islam), and the fishing voyages, through which many Butonese gain their livelihood. Furthermore, this paper will comment on which of these cultural forms may be relevant for a church that is consistent with, and at home in, Butonese culture.

## **2. GOSPEL AND CULTURE**

This paper assumes that the gospel can be discovered by people, who believe and call themselves Butonese, and act in ways that validate their cultural identity, and for those people to still feel at home in their culture. Contextualised attempts at communicating the gospel, and forming a Butonese church, therefore, will aim to help Butonese people discover what the gospel means for them and their culture. Any cultural transformation, including that brought by the gospel, is most valid and effective when done in a way that respects, and is consistent with, local culture (Kraft, 1979). Contextualised communication of the gospel, and contextualised church forms, are those that are at home in a local culture, rather than being imposed from another culture. This recognises the relevance of Christ, and the Christian message (the gospel), for all peoples, and all nations, for all times, and not just for Jews 2,000 years ago, or Westerners today. It is not that the gospel needs accommodating to local culture, but that local people can read and accept the good news as their story (Bediako, 1994). The beauty of a developing local theology is that it will be at home in the local culture. Jacob Loewen said God has buried so much treasure in scripture that we will never find it all until the interpretive perspectives

of each of the languages and societies of the world have been applied to them. Each culture asks different questions, and it will be fascinating to see what questions and contributions we hear and see from Buton (Kraft, 1996, p. 18).

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

This research is an anthropological literature overview, in preparation for participant observation.<sup>2</sup> The author is collecting any relevant literature, on which the current paper is based, but, ultimately, would like to live among Butonese people, and observe their lives and society. This approach is one of ethnomethodology, learning about a culture by going and living with the people, learning from them, tuning into their world, taking an interest in their concerns, and generally getting “under the skin” of local people, and seeing life from their perspective. I would like to seek informants, with detailed knowledge of the various facets of Butonese culture, collect life stories through interviews, visit local libraries and cultural associations, and observe rituals, such as, the initiation rites, marriage rites, and mortuary practices described by Yamaguchi (1999, p. 11). This process, however, has begun with a literature overview, three brief trips to Sulawesi, and correspondence with Butonese people, and other researchers.

The approach is limited, because I am not living in Buton, and I am not ethnically Indonesian, let alone Butonese. In the 19th century, anthropologists mostly relied on reports from missionaries and travellers for their data. It is only in the 20th century that a more

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<sup>2</sup> Geertz suggests, if we want to understand what a science is, we should look, firstly, not at its theories or findings, nor what its apologists say about it, but at what its practitioners actually do. Anthropologists (or at least social and cultural anthropologists) do ethnography, and, therefore, to understand ethnography, is to begin to comprehend what anthropology is about (C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1988, p. 5, in D. Jacobson, *Reading Ethnography*, Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, pp. 1, 125). Ethnography is the description of a particular culture, typically resulting from participant-observation fieldwork, where the researcher lives and participates in a culture, in order to observe and study it (Jacobson, *Reading Ethnography*, 1991; M. Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research: A Critical Guide*, London UK: Longman, 1998).

sophisticated anthropological method has developed in ethnography, by which anthropologists ideally live among the people they are studying (Hammersley, 1998, pp. 2-3). Ethnographies claim validity, based on the researcher actually having been there in person. For the last half-century, at least, their presence authenticates the basis of an ethnography; in Geertz's words, "of having penetrated, or been penetrated by, the culture, having actually been there" (1988, pp. 4-5).

There is still cultural information that can be discovered without living among a people. However, this information is limited, and will need to be verified by local observation, and by Butonese people themselves. This is particularly true of any suggestions about possible connections that the Christian gospel may make with Butonese culture. Any such suggestions are only possible connections, and will need to be checked with local Butonese, and, particularly, local Butonese Christians, when, and as, a contextualised church forms.

### **FACTORS OF BUTONESE CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Butonese people have a rich cultural heritage. Buton reflects the diverse linguistic situation of the whole of Sulawesi. There are four Butonese languages, and various dialects, including one language (Wolio) which is one of only three in Sulawesi with a literary tradition. Their society is divided into various levels, the ceremonies for appointing new rulers are detailed, and they hold a complex understanding of the spiritual world; mixing animism, Hinduism, and Islam. Historically, the Butonese have been involved in slave-trading, fighting off Australian sailors, accommodating to Dutch and Japanese colonialists, and, finally, integrating with the Republic of Indonesia.

The basis for Butonese identity is unclear. The following sections describe parts of Butonese culture that *may* be the basis for Butonese identity. This outline is based on the available literature, and preliminary exposure to Buton:

1. Butonese political traditions (the Sultanate)
2. Butonese religion (Folk Islam)
3. Butonese livelihood (fishing)

This paper introduces, and where possible, expands on these cultural aspects. Future fieldwork could investigate other factors, and the relative importance of each, in the formation of Butonese cultural identity.

## 1. BUTON'S SULTANATE TRADITIONS

There are different stories about the origins of Butonese people. One Butonese origin myth relates that, in the 13th century, a Chinese named Teweke followed the vision of a woman, who appeared to him as a bright light, and sailed to the Cia-Cia village of Wabula on south Buton. The remains of the boat – known outside the village as *Wa Kambaibunga* – can still be seen. *Wa Kambaibunga* is a sacred site or *sangia*, and is said to be the ancestor of all Butonese *perahu* (a particular type of fishing boat, common in Buton) (Southon, 1995, p. 13; Yamaguchi, 1999, p. 15). The boat *Wa Kambaibunga* is honoured like a god by the community, and called on when they want a wish fulfilled (Cense, 1954, p. 175). I would like to further investigate these, and any other origin myths. But the most significant part of Butonese history is the sultanate (*Kesultanan Buton*). Buton developed a rich variety of traditions surrounding the sultanate. The history and essence of sultanate traditions are likely to be central to Butonese cultural identity.

### a. *Sultanate History*

The kingdom of Buton was established in the 15th century, and its sixth *raja* (king) converted to Islam in 1540 or 1542, and became the first Sultan.<sup>3</sup> Under his reign, the whole kingdom, including the islands of Muna, Kabaena, Tukang Besi, and Buton, formally converted to Islam, and were ruled from Baubau, the capital on Buton Island. The sultanate remained self-governing through Dutch colonial times, but was dissolved in 1960, and incorporated into Indonesia. However, there is still a locally-recognised sultan in Buton, Drs Haji

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<sup>3</sup> A. M. Zahari, *Sejarah masuknya Islam di Buton dan perkembangannya*, Buton Indon: Baubau, 1980, mimeographed, p. 40, has calculated the transition to the Sultanate took place around 1542. J. W. Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton, S.E. Sulawesi, Indonesia", in *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 141-1 (1985), estimated back from this time that the monarchy must have begun in the first half of the 15th century.

La Ode Munarfa. Sultan Munarfa functions as an important community leader, and as the Rektor of Baubau's University (Universitas Dayanu Ikasanuddin). Others say the kingdom of Buton is regarded to have arisen in the beginning of the 14th century. The sultanate had limited supervision under VOC protection during the 17th to 19th centuries, the Dutch colonial period, and even under Japanese occupation. The Butonese are quite proud they maintained their independence, and assert they were never colonised by Dutch or Japanese!

### ***b. Rulers and Sultans***

The first ruler of Buton was Queen Wa-Kaa-Kaa. There is a myth about her divine descent, and being born from bamboo, as with other southeast Sulawesi rulers.<sup>4</sup> She is reputed to be the daughter of Mongolian Kubilai Khan (unique to Buton), who married Majapahit prince Sibatara (common in Indonesian tradition). Another story says she is an adopted child of one of the *pata limbona*, who founded Kerajaan Buton (Schoorl, Zahari). Yet another ascribes Chinese origin to Buton through her (Yamaguchi, 1999, p. 10).

The second *raja* (monarch) was Queen Bulawambona, and her son Bataraguru became the third *raja*, and he visited the court of Mojopahit. His son and successor, Tuarade, the fourth *raja*, also visited Mojopahit, and returned with four regalia, later known as *syara Jawa* (Zahari, 1977, pp. 38-42; Schoorl, 1985, p. 103). Little is known of this period, but, on the basis of these relations, Schoorl postulates Buton was under Hindu-Javanese influence (1985, p. 103).

According to the sultanate's documents, the sixth *raja* Murham became the first Sultan (1538-1584). He is a Butonese folk hero, and is remembered as a ruler who often travelled around Buton and talked

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<sup>4</sup> Myths of the original figure of raja being born from bamboo are found in Muna, Tiworo, Kabaena, and Kolaka Utara (north Kolaka) societies. Sejarah Kebangkitan Nasional Daerah Sulawesi Tenggara (1978/1979), H. Yamaguchi, *A study on cultural representations of the historical past in Buton society, southeast Sulawesi*, Department of Anthropology, Graduate School of Social Studies, Tokyo Japan: Hitotsubashi University Press, 1999, pp. 9-10, 24.

to the people (Zahari, 1977, p. 46; Schoorl, 1985). Some of the subsequent sultans referred to in the literature include:

- Sultan Dayanu Ikhsanuddin, Buton's fourth Sultan (1598-1631), built the Wolio fort, established the sultanate council, which lasted until 1960, and issued *Sarana Wolio*, a constitution for the sultanate (Yamaguchi, 1999, p. 24).
- Sultan Muhammed Idrus (1824-1851) sought to persuade his subjects to give up superstitious practices, including ancestor worship. He built on *Murtubat Tujuh*, to develop a new constitution, the *sarana Wolio* (Zahari, 1977, p. 128).
- Sultan Asyikin (1906-). Aruna Bola was the candidate for the throne before Asyikin, but was not prepared to sign the far-reaching new contract the Dutch East Indies wanted to impose (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 106-107).
- Sultan La Ode Falihi was the last (official) Sultan. La Ode Munarfa, his first son, is locally considered the current Sultan.

There are complex rituals for appointing a sultan (Berg, 1939). The son of a sultan can become his successor, only if he was given birth by the head spouse during the governance of his father. This so seldom happened that a saying developed that "God seldom gives children to a queen during the governance of her husband" (Berg, 1939, p. 481). Apparently, Butonese prefer to choose with their customs rather than allow automatic inheritance. The requirements and rituals for appointing a sultan may have implications for leadership selection for a Butonese church.

The sultan's coronation includes a ceremonial washing. The water is carried in bamboo from different places, covered with a white cloth, and stored the night before at a hill named Lilil, where the grave of the late sultan, and a big holy stone, was located. Ointment was also applied as a sign the king should have a glorious reign, and have no disease during his governance (Berg, 1939). These ceremonies may

have implications for contextualised worship, so investigation of their meaning, and whether they are used for people other than the sultan, could be fruitful.

**c. *The Sultanate's Ethos***

Schoorl (1994, pp. 28-29) describes the ideology that was developed to stimulate subjects to work for the interests of the sultanate and its inhabitants. The *Sarana Wolio* began by articulating the responsibility of Butonese subjects towards one another's well being:

“Let it be known to all, that, in the beginning of the drawing up of the constitution for the sultanate of Wolio, there were four fundamental considerations:

- firstly, that you have respect one for another;
- secondly, that you care for one another;
- thirdly, that you love one another;
- fourthly, that you venerate and praise one another.

“Those who are set in authority above us, we respect or fear; those who are equal in station to us, are the objects of our care; to those whom we are placed above, we show compassion. There are different reasons for being venerated and praised: because of greatness of spirit; because of piety; because of skills, which may be valuable for the entire kingdom, and for other reasons also. In brief, those people who are honoured are those who have wrought some good for the whole kingdom. There are different ways of showing our gratitude, for example, in praising someone for these things, by appointing or raising to a certain function or office, by giving gifts or by showing respect and honour. Such a show of honour is the whetstone for the spirit of the people of Wolio, that it grow not idle or enfeebled, that it remain ever mighty, ever keen” (Schoorl, 1994, p. 29).

The *Sarana Wolio* suggests ideals of patriotism and community service were valued, at least in official discourse. Gospel values of living and serving others could connect with these parts of Butonese culture.



## 2. BUTON'S FOLK ISLAM AND RELIGIOUS MIX

The religion, almost all Butonese people confess, is (Sunni) Islam. The origins of Islam are not certain, though it may have been brought to Buton by someone from Ternate, after a war they won against Buton. Like other places in Indonesia, Islam was added on top of a mix of Hinduism and animism. Perhaps the success of Islam in Buton, and other areas, is because it has been able to adjust itself to the cultures and beliefs that are already there. In the middle of the 16th century (1540) the sixth ruler of Buton (Haluoleo) converted to Islam, and became the first Sultan. (Kendari's largest university is named after him.) The whole kingdom followed Haluoleo, and changed their religion to follow Islam. Interestingly, the Sultan was considered to be the representative of Allah on earth. The great mosque (*mesjid agung*) on Baubau's old fort (*kraton*), built in the 16th century, is locally considered to be the oldest in East Indonesia. One local reported it was built 2,000 years ago! (We were interested that either his perception of the mosque's age, or his pride in the religious heritage of Buton, meant the mosque would have been built before Muhammed's birth!)

Although Islam has this tradition, there are definite traces of non-orthodox belief. That the Sultan, for example, is considered the representative of Allah on earth echoes the beliefs of Hindu kingdoms throughout the archipelago. The great mosque obviously has pride of place in the centre of Buton's cultural centre (the *Kraton* in Baubau), yet there is a belief that, under the mosque, in a room locked away, people can talk to dead people, though it has been sealed up, because it is dangerous. (I am not sure if the danger is as a potential distraction from orthodox Islam, or dangerous just to tamper with the spirits. A study of the history of the mosque, and its land, could be fruitful to learn what else has stood on the site.) The Islamic teaching in Buton, we can observe from its history and present-day practice, is not "pure Islam" but a mixture of traditions.

### a. *Animist Influences*

There are also clear animist influences in Butonese religious practice. Butonese tend to follow various forms of magic and superstition. This can be seen in practices that are used to deal with the spiritual world.

Butonese give offerings and special gifts to holy places that are considered male and female gods. Shamanism is widespread, practised to guarantee success in agriculture or fishing. There are many spirits that live side-by-side with the visible world, and the spiritual world can be seen by certain people, who have special power. Clever shamans (*dukun pandai*) can relate to the spiritual world, to oppose the influence of spirits. Sometimes they can marry with spirits, or carry weapons, or riches, back from a city in the other world. Guardian spirits (*malaikat pelindung*) guard houses, boats, and villages. Butonese believe spirits can bring sickness and disaster, or also help with guidance. Spirits of ancestors, who have died, still have important tasks. They bring help or sickness to their relatives, depending on what those relatives do. Trees and stones that look extraordinary are considered to contain spirits. If a tree falls, the spirit is then free, and can bring problems to a nearby village or farm (Donohue, 1995, p. 5). I would like to find out more about aspects of Butonese mysticism, and any ancestor worship that may be practised.

#### **b. Hindu Influences**

*Hindu settlers.* In addition to the Hindu-Javanese influence on Buton's early *rajas*, oral traditions indicate early Hindu presence in the region. According to tradition, after Sultan Murhum's conversion, Buton's inhabitants were obliged to follow. But a group of Javanese Hindus, who had left Mojopahit (Java) after its Islamisation, refused. They preferred voluntary death, and dug their own mass grave on Buton's south coast, near Betauga.

*Caste system.* The caste system in traditional Butonese politics has a close relationship with religion, though it appears closer to Hindu beliefs than Muslim. The form of government was rather hierarchical including three to four castes. The highest caste in the community was the royal *kaomu*, whose lives and work focused on the *Kraton*. Through until today, these families hold the title *La Ode* (or *Wa Ode* for women) as part of their names. The middle caste are the free community, known as *walaka*. The third caste are the commoners, known as the *papara*. There is also reference to a fourth, lower caste, including slaves, criminals, and prisoners of war, known as *batua*.

Every level, or caste, had its own tasks, and Butonese were not permitted to marry outside their caste.

*Reincarnation.* Schoorl's research of Buton surprisingly revealed a strong belief in reincarnation (1985). Reincarnation is the belief that the soul, or some power, passes, after death, into another body. Because it is predominantly found in Hindu-Buddhist areas, it is surprising to see it also documented among the Butonese. While ancient Butonese religion, or more modern Sufism, may have played a role in reincarnation's adoption, there is stronger evidence that the concept derived from Javanese Hinduism. Early *rajas* (rulers) had contact with the Javanese Mojopahit kingdom, oral traditions indicate early Hindu presence in the region, and the reincarnation beliefs Schoorl documented resemble those in Java, as described by Geertz (1960, p. 75-76; in Schoorl, 1985, p. 123).

The Hindu doctrine of reincarnation teaches that, after death, a person's soul is reborn in another being, according to the law of *karma*. *Karma* is the thoughts, words, and actions that affect later lives. Butonese beliefs have no mention of *karma*, and the form of rebirth is not discussed as much as the speed of return. There is, moreover, difference of belief among the Butonese about whether the speed of return is determined by good works (*amal*), special knowledge (*ilmu*), or people with special power over when and where spirits will return (*pasucu*). The Butonese concept of reincarnation does not dwell on the endless cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), as in Hinduism. Butonese talk more about how reincarnation occurs within families. Spirits are said to return in grandchildren, or children, as the "replacement of the dead" (*kabolosina mia mate*). The belief seems to connect generations, and maintain the memory of ancestors. The wife of the last Sultan Falihi (1938-1960) is said to have returned in her grandson, who displayed similar characteristics to the sultana, and, at a young age, pointed to her jewellery, and said it belonged to him (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 104-117). A belief in reincarnation may reveal Butonese felt needs about respect for ancestors, continuity of existence (through one's descendants), and knowledge of the afterlife. Whatever the particulars, the good news is that Christ, as our guide, and Lord of the future, answers our fear of the unknown, and the resurrection offers hope for

salvation, and life forever with God and His people (Parshall, 1983). This is not earned by good works, or manipulated by secret knowledge, but received by grace through faith. Ritual experts cannot help anyone's final destiny because eternal life depends on people's own response.

On top of the pre-existing animistic-Hindu mix, Islam has been added. A folk Islam developed that has assimilated Islamic beliefs and worship, with various forms of animism and Hindu-influenced ideas.

*c. Islam*

Abdul Wahid, according to Butonese tradition, first brought Islam to Buton. He was an Arab from Gujerat, who came to Burangasi on southeast Buton, around 1527. Burangasi inhabitants were the first Butonese converts to Islam. On Wahid's second visit, around 1542, Sultan Murhum converted to Islam (Zahari, 1980, p. 40; Schoorl, 1985, p. 126; Southon, 1995, p. 18). Today, Butonese are almost 100 percent (Sunni) Muslim. Other world religions are very sparsely represented; for example there are only seven Christians that I know of, most of whom have married into neighbouring Christian groups, and do not live on the island. The extent of Butonese identity with their Islamic faith is shown in their statement: "To be Butonese is to be Muslim". Although they say they only believe in Allah, as is taught by Islam, they also believe in matters that are not drawn from orthodox Islam. Many Butonese feel more comfortable with Sufism, rather than orthodox or fanatical Islam, perhaps because Sufism is more like Hinduism.

Butonese religion has been syncretistic and aristocratic. Thus Butonese practice Islamic rituals, but also hold to traditional practices. In other Indonesian coastal societies, Islam may dominate the worldview of the community, but in no place has it completely replaced indigenous/local religion. Traditional beliefs and practices continue to play an important role in Buton, as elsewhere (Kiem, p. 96). Geertz comments:

In each locality there is an interesting and usually complementary relationship between the two forms of worship,

which are, in fact, not generally felt by the people to be separate traditions at all (Geertz, 1963, p. 66, in Kiem, p. 96).

Some Islamic belief is merely a light veneer over the older beliefs. Cederroth says they are not dominant and “resemble more a thin veneer through, which the older beliefs are still clearly visible” (1997, pp. 165-167). But, in other practices, Islamic practice is more prominent, if not dominant. Its relegation may be a source of tension with orthodox believers. Islam has not spread completely through Butonese society and religious practice. This could be termed syncretism, though, from a Butonese point of view, there is no inconsistency in beliefs and practices.

It is clear that, for many Muslims in Indonesia, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the focus of their life has been, and, in many cases, still is, the Islamic order, of which they are members. This faith commitment is intimately connected to family relationships. Membership of an Islamic order is not just a question of religious belief, but an expression of individual and family identity. Yinger maintains that, although many ethnic groups have strong religious ties, the ethnic-religion connection is not unbreakable (1994, p. 270). However, religions, with strong connections to particular ethnic groups, are less likely to lose members to another religion. They may drop out, or become inactive, or switch groups within the religion, but are less likely to feel they can change religion altogether, and still maintain their cultural identity. They can “backslide”, as Muslims, and still keep the quasi-ethnic family, neighbourhood, language, and culture ties that formed part of the identity. But, transferring religious allegiance, can and often does reduce one’s cultural identity.

#### ***d. Interreligious Relations and Refugees***

In spite of the aim of religious harmony in Indonesia, conflict between religions exists. Conflict between individuals and groups, or anxiety felt by particular individuals or groups, may lie behind the intercommunal violence that has blighted Indonesia in recent years (if not centuries). An understanding of differences, and their origins, will be helpful in understanding Butonese identity. Christian-Muslim relations are stretched to violence in Maluku, and now also in parts of

Sulawesi. To date, southeast Sulawesi has, fortunately, avoided the widespread violence of her nearby neighbours.

My meeting with the locally-recognised sultan in Buton, Drs Haji La Ode Munarfa, was insightful in his desire to live in peace. We were invited to accompany the sultan to a family ceremony celebrating the first haircut of a baby. Sultan Munarfa explained the underlying culture and religion of what we witnessed:

When we have this party, we invite everyone to come together and eat together happily. . . . On this day, at this moment, they see how a small child has had their hair cut. This is an exceptional activity that we often do, because it has been our custom for hundreds of years. This is because we have our religion, a religion that is perfect and complete, and we all know that by this tradition, today, I have made complete your religion. . . . We all are among the followers that have been here in Buton already for hundreds of years . . . I myself am the Sultan of Buton, the 39th Sultan of Buton. My father was the 38th Sultan of Buton. So we have a culture here which is Islamic culture. This is truly Islamic culture that we have respected and performed for hundreds of years.<sup>5</sup>

Butonese, perhaps typical of Indonesians, take great pride in their religious heritage, while highly valuing their tolerance of other faiths.

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<sup>5</sup> “*Kalau kita berpesta kita undang semua untuk sama-sama kita makan sama-sama kita bergembira. . . . Pada hari ini juga, pada saat ini, mereka melihat bagaimana seorang anak kecil telah dicukur rambutnya. Harus ?dicukur rambutnya baru, ini, menjadikan eh diketahui bahwa sudah dikumpul dan diketahui oleh keluarga dsbnya masyarakat, di kampung atau di desa ini. Ini kejadian yang luar biasa buat kita seamannya, yang sering kita lakukan oleh karena adat istiadat kita ini sudah ratusan tahun berjalan. Oleh karena, kita ini mempunyai agama, agama yang sudah sempurna kita semua tahu tok bahwa adat itu pada hari ini saya sempurnakan agamamu. Coba, dan semua agama, ada kata-katanya pada hari ini saya sempurnakan agama, sudah sempurna dan kita semua ini antara lain penganut itu sudah ratusan tahun di Buton ini, kalau saya katakan sudah ratusan tahun oleh karena ya Islam sudah ratusan tahun. Saya sendiri Sultan Buton, Sultan Buton yang ke39. Ayah saya Sultan Buton yang ke38. Jadi kita punya kebudayaan di sini sudah kebudayaan Islam. Dan benar-benar kebudayaan Islam, yang kita sembah ratusan tahun.*” (Sultan’s speech, December, 1999, author’s translation.)

Boland writes of an indigenous Javanese tendency to tolerance that is reinforced by Islam's respect of Christianity, as another religion "of the book" (1982, p. 205-206). Tolerance has also been an important aspect of state-promoted and state-sanctioned *pancasila* identity. The Indonesian ideal of tolerance, upheld by the sultan and others, unfortunately, does not always work out in practice. Pak Sultan commented:

And to make friends with other friends, who are people of another religion, we don't mind, we can live together. Not like in Ambon, where Christians and Muslims are enemies. How can it be true that they are truly religious, Christian or Islam? They are killing one another. This is it, how can it be that prominent religious figures [are fighting]? . . . Ambon has been well known for hundreds of years for its peaceful life, and Islam and Christianity lived peacefully. Why is it like this at this time? . . . There are many from Ambon [here], and you have my mercy. Many from their families have died, and their houses destroyed, and so on. Now that there are such difficulties there, they return to their fatherland, this land of Buton, to the sultanate, which is the territory of Islam. See, there is peace, and so on, here.<sup>6</sup>

After the formal ceremony, we talked with some of the refugees from Ambon. Ibu Indah,<sup>7</sup> for example, moved with her family to Ambon 30 years ago. Recently, however, her children grew more and more distressed, as they witnessed repeated acts of violence. Her daughter

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<sup>6</sup> "Dan berteman dengan teman-teman yang lain tokoh beragama lain, kita tidak apa-apa, sama-sama hidup dsb. (Ya) Tidak seperti di Ambon itu coba. Kristen and Islam bermusuhan. Apa yang sebenarnya apa mereka itu beragama, beragama Kristen atau beragama Islam dsb. Mereka bermusuhan membunuh-membunuh dsb. Inilah, bagaimana tokoh-tokoh agama dan, ini, kenapa? . . . Yang terkenal di Ambon itu ratusan tahun hidupnya damai dan Islam dan Kristen hidup damai. Kenapa saat ini coba . . . Banyak dari Ambon kasihan setiap orang. Ah, bagaimana di sana itu, eh, ya, keluarganya banyak yang mati, rumahnya kebakar dsb. Itu coba, sekarang ada di sini lembah ke daerahnya di tanah airnya kembali, Buton ini, ke Sultanatan daerah Islam Ya coba ada aman dsb." (Sultan's speech, December, 1999, author's translation.)

<sup>7</sup> Not her real name.

Iri<sup>8</sup> found it difficult to feel safe, and sleep at night. Two months previously, Ibu Indah's family returned to their Butonese village. Their family was one of 18,000 families who had returned as part of the 103,000 "Exodus people" (Indonesian government statistics, 9/12/99). Along with 16,000 of these families, Ibu Indah's family did not have their own accommodation, and so lived with the extended family. "Please send us help from Australia", Ibu Indah asked. I am interested in how migration and forced migration of refugees from Ambon (the "Exodus people") may be affecting Butonese identity, and how much such migration is historically typical, as many Butonese had to move around, in earlier centuries, pursuing work, or avoiding slave traders.

### 3. BUTONESE FISHING

Butonese are renowned as seafarers, boat-builders, fishermen, traders, and gatherers of *tripang* "sea cucumber", and commercial seashells (Anceaux, Grimes, et al, 1995, p. 573). There are four sources of income for most Butonese: fishing, agriculture, small-scale market trading, and sailing/*merantau* (Southon, 1995, pp. 73-74). Sailing/*merantau* is the most-lucrative activity.<sup>9</sup> Sailing is a higher-status activity, and this is reflected in skin colour (lighter for women of sailing households, known as people of the beach (*orang pantai*), who spend more time inside than their agricultural neighbours, who work more outside, known as people of the mountain (*orang gunung*) (Southon, 1995, p. 32). Sailing imagery is central in Butonese life, and the best anthropological source on this aspect of Butonese culture is Michael Southon, *The Navel of the Perahu: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village* (1995).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Not her real name.

<sup>9</sup> Historically, Butonese have had involvement in slave-trading; both as traders, and its product. A VOC report on Celebes, at the beginning of the 19th century, said the following about Buton: "We know nothing about the population, only that repeated attacks from pirates have driven the people gradually away from the coast, and have also decreased the population; moreover, we know of no place in the Indies, where the poverty is so widespread and acute as on Buton" (Schoorl, 1994).

<sup>10</sup> See the author's unpublished paper "Reading the Navel of the Perahu – An Assessment of an Ethnography". For other reviews, see G. Ammarell, "The Navel of



Southon's work suggests some metaphors, or cultural keys, for Jesus' call to discipleship and the Christian community (cf. Schreiter, 1985, pp. 73-74). These would need to be checked with locals for their validity and relevance, but are worth exploring. Many Butonese work as fishermen or sailors, and spend long days and nights at sea. They could, perhaps, identify with Peter and other fishermen called by Jesus; "Come, be My disciples, and I will show you how to fish for people" (Matt 4:19). Hopefully, Butonese people will hear that call to follow Christ, and, themselves, become fishers of people. The fishing imagery that Southon describes suggests four other possibilities for contextualisation of the gospel.

**a. Voyage as Joint Venture**

Firstly, Southon argues *perahu* sailing is based on an ideology of a joint enterprise: based on evidence of financial arrangements, decision-making, and historical precedent. Profit for the voyage is jointly shared by all. The crew and captain divide up their profit, according to shares. Captain and crew (and boat owner, if his profit is share-based) all risk loss, and all benefit, in fixed proportion, from success as they "search for a living together" (*mencari nafkah bersama-sama*) (Southon, 1995, pp. 61-71, 138). Those who sail on *perahu* share the risks equally, and thus decide together where to sail, and what cargoes to purchase. Southon reported Lande had an emphasis on the *musyawarah* (conference) and decision-making, through consensus. One of the captains commented on the *musyawarah*:

The cargoes that we carry, such as (empty) bottles, timber, we decide together in the conference. No one can make that

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the *Perahu*: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village" (book review), *Journal of Asian Studies* 55-3 (1996); H. B. Broch, "The Navel of the *Perahu*: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village" (book review), in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 2-3 (1996); C. Healey, "The Navel of the *Perahu*: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village" (book review), in *Oceania* 67-3 (1997); P. Alexander, "The Navel of the *Perahu*: Meaning and Values in the Maritime Trading Economy of a Butonese Village" (book review), *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 9-2 (1998).

decision alone, it must be together. If there is no agreement, you can't sail (Southon, 1995, p. 63).

Sailing voyages, as joint ventures, and the crew as a family, are metaphors consistent with images of the church as a group of people on a journey together. Jesus' followers often travelled in *the boat*, and in that context, learned a number of discipleship lessons.<sup>11</sup> They are carried in the boat around on their mission from the scenes of feeding the thousands. As fellow pilgrims and sailors, they can be pictured sharing their hopes and fears of what may be on the other side, encouraging one another in their calls to ministry, challenging each other to faith and integrity, and supporting each other in storms (Hunter, 2001, p. 8). In Buton, it may be appropriate to represent the church in terms of "voyaging together in the boat". A *perahu* crew's equality, joint decision-making, shared risks, and being cast as a family, are all consistent with (and, in fact, could enrich) biblical views of the church.<sup>12</sup> While boats are defined in terms of the house, the larger village unit is defined in terms of the boat, and so, too, the church could be likened to a boat<sup>13</sup> (Southon, 1995, pp. 121-122, 140).

### ***b. Butonese Gender and Work Roles***

Butonese gender relations combine a distinction of roles, with a valuing of marital harmony. Men are seen as mobile, and women immobile. The men come and go, searching for income (*merantau*), and build a house, and the women stay and maintain the house (Southon, 1995, p. 97). A Butonese woman emphasised her "staying"

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mark 1-8, esp. 1:16; 6:45-52; Luke 5:1-11; John 21:1-14; cf. other metaphors in 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 2:19; 1 Peter 2:10.

<sup>12</sup> Theology needs the contribution of all of the world's cultures to be complete (L. J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 397; C. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1996, p. 330).

<sup>13</sup> Boats are built with odd-numbered planks, with something leftover or incomplete, which contains within itself the possibility of renewal. Perhaps this should be observed, when building any church buildings, or the symbol could be mentioned, when urging renewal (M. Southon, *The navel of the perahu: meaning and values in the maritime trading economy of a Butonese village*. Canberra ACT: Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University Press, 1995, pp. 107-108).

(*tinggal*) role when she said, ideally, a man should die before his wife, to go ahead to the after-world to build a house; “We don’t know how to build houses, we only stay” (*kita tidak tahu bikin rumah, kita hanya tinggal*) (Southon, 1995, pp. 115, 124). Women, with this perspective (or men, aware of this cultural idea), may be particularly receptive to the gospel being presented in Jesus’ words of going ahead to prepare a place, in a house of many rooms for His followers (John 14:1-4; Southon, 1995, pp. 97, 124).

Furthermore, before embarking, a man must have his wife’s permission (*izin*). Harmony between husband and wife is seen as very important, and the bringer of good fortune. Butonese husbands and wives refer to each other “as one boat” (like the scriptural “one flesh”) (Gen 2:23, Eph 5:28-30, Kraft, 1979, p. 59; Southon, 1995, pp. 98, 111, 117, 119). The importance placed on harmony between husband and wife, as a bringer of good fortune, would be echoed for them in scripture:

You husbands must give honour to your wives. Treat her with understanding, as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God’s gift of new life. If you don’t treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard (1 Peter 3:7).

**c. Perahu as Person**

*Perahu* are represented as being born as people: Christ invites Butonese people to be reborn by God’s Spirit. While, sometimes, *perahu* are rebuilt: God invites people to be rebuilt with Christ as a new captain or leader. *Perahu* have their navels drilled with the life-giving *lamba puse* by the *pande* (ritual expert), who imparts something of his own spirit in the process: Jesus offers to blow his Spirit on His people, and launch them out in the world (John 20:21-22).

**d. Community Leaders as Holders of Ilmu**

Community leaders, captains, or *pande* hold their position, by virtue of acquired and demonstrated *ilmu* (esoteric knowledge), which is a major preoccupation of Butonese (Southon, 1995, p. 129). Students give

their teachers ritual payments, accompanied by verses (*pantum*) that extol the virtues of the knowledge gained:

I give you money, Money that I could finish,

But you give me knowledge, Knowledge that will not finish  
until the end of the world.

*(Di situ diberikan uang, Saya bisa kasih habis,*

*Tapi diberikan ilmu ini, Dunia kiama, baru bisa haniskan.)*

The fish is dead because of the bait, Humankind is stupid  
because of the mind.

*(Ikan mati karna umpan, Manusia bodoh karna budi)* (Southon,  
1995, p. 129).

When this esoteric knowledge is demonstrated, the user acquires, or maintains, status and power in their community. The arena for demonstrating *ilmu* is often the *perahu*, as when the *pande* drills the *lamba puse* in the keel, or a captain shows great skill. Respected captains meditate on where and how long to sail, and reach decisions through awareness of their body, for example, sailing to the right if indicated by the right side of their bodies. Captains of earlier eras could summon or subdue the weather at will, and cure crew members of illnesses. Good captains are also known to be able to deal with crew and challenges with a cool and collected mind.

Church leaders, therefore, should be people with the positive qualities of *ilmu*. For example, leaders are respected, who can achieve their ends with a minimum of outer display, rather than getting angry, which is a definite sign of weakness. Church leaders, like boat captains, have a mandate to lead, but should do so with patience and self-control, and with respect for the equality and mutuality inherent in Butonese culture and the gospel<sup>14</sup> (Southon, 1995, pp. 66-67). The Butonese sayings

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<sup>14</sup> Butonese culture values humility, and has a tradition similar to some of Jesus' teaching. At Butonese ceremonial meals, higher-status individuals sit closer to the

about the desirability of *ilmu* reflect proverbs that urge the seeking of wisdom, and of the knowledge of God;

Choose my instruction rather than silver, and knowledge over pure gold. For wisdom is far more valuable than rubies. Nothing you desire can be compared with it. . . . Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in understanding (Prov 8:10-11; 9:10; cf. 1:7; 10:27; 22:4; 12:8; Eccles 12:12-14).

Butonese sailors have a trust in their captain, and Butonese villagers trust their community leaders, to understand and provide leadership in how things best operate (Southon, 1995, pp. 12-122). The gospel is about the chief captain, who showed captainly behaviour and *ilmu* in His command over nature and disease (cf. Matt 14:25; Mark 4:39-41). Christ could be presented as the captain of great *ilmu*, who invites people to follow Him, and have new life blown into their navels. Butonese perspectives on marital harmony, equality, humility, and corporate life (as voyaging together), echo gospel values that could be the basis for teaching a Butonese community about discipleship, and for them to contribute to the wider church.

## CONCLUSION

Studying Butonese culture is welcomed by Butonese people. When foreign anthropologists tell Butonese people their vocation, a typical response seems to imply Butonese people find it quite natural that others would be fascinated with Butonese culture. Sultan Munarfa expressed his desire to give (and receive) help:

Two people here from Australia want to study Indonesian and anthropology. And we are also are being given the opportunity to study English. It is good to build relationships with people

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architectural “head” of the house, but, as a rule, should sit one or two places “down” from the position their status entitles them to until their host repeatedly calls them “up” (Southon, *The navel of the perahu*, p. 95). Jesus said to take the lowest place at a banquet, rather than the place of honour, in order to teach people not to proudly seek honour for themselves; “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:7-11; cf. 11:43).

from outside the country. They want help with their studies, and we can also study with them. They want to help. When they heard I was invited here, they were very happy to come and observe our customs and traditions from our area.<sup>15</sup>

We can be thankful to God, who created a diversity of cultures, and planted seeds of the knowledge of His character and ways within people's cultures, including the Butonese. It is my prayer that Butonese people would find fulfilment in the gospel, express it in worship and discipleship within their culture, and share their insights with the wider church.

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Narekko takkala mallebbani sompe'e ulebbirenni tellengnge  
nanrewe'e.

"The sail once raised, Better to sink than to go back."  
(South Sulawesi Bugis' chant, from Ammarell, 1996)

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<sup>15</sup> "Orang dari Australia yang mau belajar Bahasa Indonesia, mau belajar tentang antropologi, dan kita juga diberikan kesempatan untuk belajar Bahasa Inggris coba hubungan dengan luar negeri. Mereka mau membantu untuk dapat/tempat belajar dan kita juga dapat belajar dengan mereka. Mereka mau membantu. Mereka dengar saya akan ke sini diundang, oh mereka amat gembira sekali juga mau melihat bagaimana adat istiadat kita di daerah kita ini." (Sultan's speech, December, 1999, author's translation.)

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