

MEDIATIZATION AND COMMODIFICATION OF *RAMBUSOLO*

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ABSTRACT

Rambusolo, the death ritual of *Aluktodolo* (ancestor's belief) practiced by Toraja community in South Sulawesi, has undergone a shift of orientation from sacred to profane. This shift is due to media publication that defines, promotes, and creates the symbolic aspect of *Rambusolo* ritual in tourism industry frame. *Rambusolo* is disseminated as mystical, unique, exotic, and original ritual simultaneously framed as the icon of tourists destination.

The media produce, reproduce, and disseminate symbolic form of *Rambusolo* sequence in wide and unbounded scale by reconstructing and supporting reader's perception when they read the news or watch the ritual. Unfortunately, the concern of media is to make *Rambusolo* ritual a commodity. This practice is known as mediatization and has caused desacralization of *Rambusolo* resulting in the change of social relation among the Torajan community.

It is possible that *Rambusolo* will miss its genuine value as a sacred ritual when it is meant as an amusing event for tourists for commercial purposes. This study suggests the stakeholders such as *tomina* and *toparengkek* (indigenous functionary), the trustee of *Tongkonan* (a symbol of Toraja community clan), the government, tourism practitioners, social organizations, academics, and senators to formalize a policy that not only supports the tourism promotion for commercial purposes but also advocates the transformation of *Rambusolo* value as the unifying ritual of Toraja community in order to preserve its symbolic aspect from commercial exploitation.

Keywords: mediatization, desacralization, *rambusolo*, *Toraja*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the people of Toraja (Torajan) in South Sulawesi, Indonesia are still practicing the ritual of *Rambusolo*, the death ritual and ceremony based on *Aluktodolo* (ancestor's belief) which is practiced by Torajan in South Sulawesi. This death ritual has been widely known by people of Indonesia and foreigners as well. This ritual has also become an interesting event that enables to attract domestic and foreign tourists. The government of Toraja, North Toraja and the local people gain adequate benefits from the visitors who come to watch *Rambusolo* ritual or visit the tombs in limestone cliffs.

Rambusolo is basically a performance in religious and social dimension (Duli & Hasanuddin, 2003:28). The shift from religious and social dimension is described by Tandilinting, as cited in Sitonda (2007:80-81). Some experts say that the cause of the shift orientation is due to the time alteration and belief of the community, the impact of globalization and modern life (Sandarupa et al. 2016: 67-68).

This shift of ritual orientation indicates that the Toraja people have changed significantly because these people geographically occupy the rural area and have strong oral cultural tradition.. As some theories state that rural and oral society tend to be conservative who preserve their traditions from the influence of foreign culture (see Ong 2013).

The shift has practical consequence to the equipment and performance of the ritual. Sitonda (2007:80-81) finds out this shift by comparing the documentation taken by Tandilinting in 1981 and documentation from Saroenggallo in 2004 which conclude that the ritual in Ketekesu is no longer equipped with *tau tau*

(effigies) but replaced by pictures of the death people. The sequence of *Rambusolo* performance has undergone addition and reduction in some particular aspects.

The *Rambusolo*, abstracted from several sources, has two main stages: *Makbatan* (part of ritual organized in *Tongkonan*) and *Makpalao* (part of ritual organized in *Langkeang* or in cottages). In those two stages, *Makpalao* is an open-accessed ritual for visitors as it is held in the field. Nevertheless, some of the activities are carried out in the *Tongkonan* as the part of initial ritual, like *Matundan* (awakening by sounding the gong), *Makbalun* (wrapping the corpse), and *Mangkalao alang* (taking the body to a granary). Those three activities are included in the first phase of *Makpalao*. The activity is moved to the field (*Rante*) on the fourth day.

The displacement from *Tongkonan* to *Rante* also shows the shift of ritual meaning and space orientation. The ritual performance of *Tongkonan* is closed and sacred in nature while in *Rante*, the ritual is displayed openly in public space which tends to reduce the value of the sanctity. The execution in public space is considered to be based on tourist interest or self-awareness and imagination of Toraja people who regard themselves the subject and the object. These encourage them to display certain closed ceremonial procession in the field. The media work not only to promote the new idea of *Rambusolo* indirectly, but also to maintain the awareness of the Toraja community on the current agreed procession which has become habitual.

Mediatization of *Rambusolo* is important to analyze in order to get explanation on how media (printed, electronic, online) narrate, display, and present it. Media, in the context of this research, are not simply studied of their role in popularizing *Rambusolo* but also on how they construct the news or reports to affect the outsiders attending the ceremony. Media also play roles in reducing and representing the value of *Rambusolo* in accordance with their interest.

This study intends to give a descriptive analysis about (a) how media present, disseminate, and define the ritual of *Rambusolo* and the consequences of mediatization and (b) negotiation in *Rambusolo* ritual alteration. The result of this study, besides basic understanding of *Rambusolo* mediatization, it is also intended as a guideline to formulate the recommendation of its shift orientation direction.

THEORY AND METHOD

The analysis of how *Rambusolo* presented in media (printed, electronic, and online media) is the focus of this study. This perspective, known as mediatization, has principal assumption that the practice of media have roles in defining social reality, denoting applied terms, affecting social interaction, changing individual imagination, and generating secularization and desacralization. In addition, media also turn out as the central point for other social institutions such as politics, religion, and ritual belief to depend on (Hjarvard, 2013).

Mediatization is a concept used to understand the roles of media in affecting people and culture. Media are considered not only as messenger but also as the institution with great influence on the others such as religion and belief (Hjarvard, 2013:80).

Cultural commodification in capitalistic society is inevitable where the authentic and the popular culture are being blurred. Here, the media existence and its commodification practice have rendered media products as commodities (Fiske in Barker, 2009:50). Media practicing commodification is a new trend which packed in the form of information and entertainment. Therefore, media can be functioned as political tool simultaneously the owner means to gain profit.

This mediatization of *Rambusolo* study used triangulation method (triangulations in combining methodologies). In this method, a cultural product is seen from text up to its surrounded political practice. The media cultural product can be observed from text until presented power relation of media in

broadcasting or even producing news text. The data collection was done through literature and media review, observation, and in-depth interview. The analysis data of media was focused on Kompas media (printed and online version) as the representation of national media, and Tribun Timur newspaper (printed and online version) as the representation of local South Sulawesi media. Some news and reports from other media were used to support the data. Furthermore, the informants in in-depth interview are from various categories such as government official, tourism practitioner, indigenous figure, and tourist.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This part presents the correlation of media and two things: social reality, and secularization and desacralization. The discussion of these two correlations was directed to the media roles in reporting Torajan culture in general and *Rambusolo* in particular.

MEDIA, CULTURE COMMODIFICATION, AND TOURISM

Both Toraja and North Toraja people have connected with the outside world. It can be seen from their ability to use and enjoy technology and media information so that the inside-outside interaction is going on massively. This ability is a part of modern society culture. Hereby, the people of Toraja can also be considered as a modern society where the awareness of utilizing and enjoying the media have lasted protractedly. For instance, their habits of documenting the *Rambusolo* ritual activities.

Media is not simply presented to report the news but also to define the reality and social interaction. There are several trends of media in defining or classifying the ritual of *Rambusolo*. Nasional Kompas online media interprets *Rambusolo* as the part of tourism. Tribun Makassar online media associates it with political context and social position. Tempo and cultural magazine tend to give a cultural critical review to the ritual of *Rambusolo*. While local TV Station inserts this ritual into tourism segment. On the basis of this propensity, media have truly represented and defined *Rambusolo* as a commercial ritual which leads to cultural commodification. In this local television, *Rambusolo* is usually broadcasted and replayed continuously especially in *mappasilaga tedong* (bull fight) event. As for national television, *Rambusolo* ceremony is framed in tourism context. By this proclivity, the media have truly represented and defined the reality of *Rambusolo* as a ceremony that leads to culture commodification as *Kompas.com* online media format which lays news feature of Toraja, especially *Rambusolo*, as a destination being reported in tourism context named "Travel". Format and news content of *Kompas.com* are such as economics, football, techno, entertainment, automotive, health, female, property, travel, education, colour, pictures, videos, and television. From those whole formats, the news about Toraja and *Rambusolo* ceremony are mostly framed in to travel feature. Therefore, *Rambusolo* in Kompas online news is positioned as a standard of value and taste which have been constructed and is expected the readers eager to visit Toraja and witness the ritual. However, that media can also be accessed by Torajan people so that they are able to reflect and manage themselves based on media perception.

In Kompas online news, *Rambusolo* is reported as a magnet that attracts visitors to come. From this news, two different concerns which mutually dispute are figuring out. First of all, Toraja tradition, *Rambusolo* is based on the belief of *Aluktodolo* considering as a norm of life. Secondly, media comes with the purpose of tourism promotion which is clearly aimed as culture commodification.

The commodification through online media is done by reconstruct and support the reader perception (prospective tourist) when reading news. Toraja people are commodified by being illustrated as a society which is different from others because they still sacralized the death. Besides that, the artifacts from the rites are also still accessible when visiting Toraja.

Culture and tradition are perceived as a burden of meaning which refers to "strange" or "unusual" condition. To explain the alienation, the words unique, rare, peculiar, attractive, exotic and others are repeated frequently as persuasive action to readers whereas, the tourists may experience another

impression when visiting Toraja. Or reversely, the Toraja people are subject who consciously negotiate with people who viewed to fit the tourism perception. The narrative representative pattern of Toraja people and *Rambusolo* ceremony in Kompas online media can be described as follows:

To tell about tourism object in Tana Toraja especially *Rambusolo* ritual which have been constructed narratively so it is worth to consume, watch, and visit.

1. To mention the quantity and attendance of domestic and foreign tourists. The leaning is to accentuate the presence of foreign tourist.
2. To recount the accessibility and facility of tourism location provided in Toraja.

In Kompas online news: Tuesday, January 8, 2013 entitled "*Mumi Toraja dan Kerbau setengah Miliar Rupiah*" (Torajan Mummy and Half Billion Rupiah for the Price of Buffalo) shows the media practice in commodifying and defining the social reality of *Rambusolo*. This action is presented by way of reconstructing and supporting the reader perception towards *Rambusolo* ritual which is considered full of mystery.

"Wisata ke Tana Toraja memang sarat misteri, sehingga layak disebut sebagai tur makam dan kematian. Makam batu bertebaran di mana-mana. Tambahan lagi, upacara kematian Rambu Solo digelar besar-besaran yang banyak menarik perhatian wisatawan domestik dan mancanegara (Kadek (ed), 2015)."

"Travelling to Tana Toraja is considered full of mystery so it is proper to say as a tour of tomb and death. The stones of the tomb spread everywhere. Besides that, the funeral ceremony of *Rambusolo* is held massively and grab attention of the local and foreign tourists (Kadek (ed), 2015)."

"Maka, berwisata ke Toraja akan menjadi paripurna dengan menyaksikan langsung bagaimana upacara *rambu tuka' atau rambusolo* digelar (Ayu, 2015 dalam Kompas.com)."

"therefore, visiting Tana Toraja will become the plenary by witnessing the process of *rambu tuka'* (thanksgiving or *Rambusolo* (death ritual) (Ayu, 2015 in Kompas.com)."

On the first citation, Toraja is represented as tourism destination because it can provide and present the mystery sensation for visitors. The diction "mystical" in the media is shown to the tourist perspective to imagine and define Toraja tradition, custom, and habit in addressing the death. Basically Toraja tradition upholds a death, but for those people, death is not a mystery except for an indigenous belief.

Cultural diversity background from each reader, especially those who do not celebrate the death ritual like the way Toraja people do, will assume the *Rambusolo* ceremony as mystical ritual. This definition, will indirectly become a standard value for tourist, as an imaginary thing before they get around. To establish the idea in readers mind, so the last sentence is emphasized by the words "mystery" and "unique" in describing *Rambusolo*.

The way and the scheme of narrative construction in commodification Toraja people, especially *Rambusolo* ritual, the media begins the news by using specific dictions that refer to quality. For instance, the use of word "mystery" is a persuasive action to commodify *Rambusolo*. This phenomenon, is repetitively practised by Kompas online media, as in its news title "*Rambusolo, the unique funeral tradition in Tana Toraja (Thursday, March 31, 2015)*" (*writer's translation*). The title converges and defines the *Rambusolo* ceremony as a unique tradition. The word "unique" does not explain the *Rambusolo* in Toraja society context with *aluktodolo* (ancestor's belief) as a whole. However, for the prospective tourist readers, the use of diction "unique" will steer the reader perception. As the result, *Rambusolo* ceremony procession will be regarded as different form of ceremony.

The term “unique” is the most frequently used diction in describing Toraja as seen in the following quotations:

1. The slogan “you should visit Toraja before you die” is not a form of politeness. North Toraja regency of South Sulawesi has certain culture uniqueness with nothing to compare around the world. This makes Toraja famous among foreign tourists.

... Toraja has a unique tradition that is still preserved and inherited from generation to generation. The funeral ceremony and the grave limestone cliffs around the village constantly attract the tourist attention (Ashdiana (ed.), 2014, in Kompas.com);

2. So, what are you waiting for? The exotic, beautiful, Toraja rich culture is waiting to be explored. If you have not been in Toraja, come and enjoy its captivation. The nature, culture, hospitality, and culinary, are certainly too bad to be missed at least once in a life time (Ayu, 2015 in Kompas.com);

3. Enjoy the other shades of a different taste of unique culture from traditional house *Tongkonan*, funeral ritual of *Rambusolo*, a burial cave *Londa*, sepulture stones *Lemo*, and baby cemetery *Kambira* (Barry, 2015, in Kompas.com).

4. Fernanda (40), a tourist from Spain, together with her 16 colleagues purposely visited North Toraja to witness that traditional ceremony. “our friend said that there is a unique funeral ceremony in here by using buffalo as the sacrificial animal. That’s why we come here before visiting other places, like Bali, Flores, and Yogyakarta. This place is very exciting, the people welcomed us with warm hospitality” she said.

Those quotations above placed Toraja as the owner of unusual or unique culture which has exceeded the definition of Torajan itself. The first and second news are described hyperbolically to touch the reader. Two different terms “unique” and “exotic” used in the first and second quotations are used to emphasize the originality of the ritual. The third quotation persuasively brings the readers to enjoy cultural sequence in Toraja, especially the ritual of *Rambusolo*. And the forth citation is about to show two forms of representation those are (a) that the use of the term “unique” by media to show the quality condition of *Rambusolo* based on its commodification purpose and (b) that media is not also creating perspectives through the representative act, but also to maintain those points of view accord on the perception believed by the tourist. For information, media has an authority to interview based on its interests and needs.

Furthermore, the media constructs a slogan called “*amazing land*” both for Toraja and North Toraja regency. This slogan is obviously created to attract the tourists visiting Toraja. This slogan is deserved for those regencies considering the stunning scenery combined with the culture and tradition which is still continually maintained (Buol, 2016, in Kompas.com). Unfortunately, the emergence of that new term put social burden for the Toraja people as the legal owner of those culture and nature which is now defined for tourism purpose.

THE CHANGE OF RAMBUSOLO IN NEGOTIATION

The youth of Toraja, on the basis of interview with three senior high school students in Rantepao, think that their culture becomes tourism object as it is regarded unique. This reasoning assumption, considering their culture “unique”, shows the shift of the young generation perception. Their sight and insight of culture in general and *Rambusolo* in particular are not transmitted and passed down traditionally through folklore but are formed and constructed by modern media. They, who are able to access technology information, tend to hold the same perception with media about *Rambusolo*. It necessarily means that media have taken over the role of *Aluktodolo* belief and various kind folklores in defining and

understanding *Rambusolo*. In consequence, the rising generation just approve and feel undisturbed of *Rambusolo* sequence change as they assume that this change is compatible with modern society.

Meanwhile, Tongkonan Ketekesu functionaries believe that media mislead the value of Toraja culture and *Rambusolo* by labeling them “unique”. They regard *Rambusolo* as the part of Toraja meaning system which is formed and arranged in value system and belief of *Aluktodolo* although they acknowledge that their culture, especially *Rambusolo*, has changed over time. Yet, they claim that this change never goes off the philosophical framework of Toraja culture.

On the other hand, the government states that the prominent charm of Toraja and North Toraja regency are *Rambusolo* and the cemeteries in limestone cliff. This encourages the government by the authority of Tourism and Cultural Department to brand North Toraja with *Rambusolo* in their website. Even the billboard in front of Tourism and Cultural Department office displays the fifteen minutes advertisement of *Rambusolo* regularly. This shows that the local government has consciously placed *Rambusolo* in tourism category that is to say they approve the cultural commodification.

Furthermore, *Tongkonan Ketekesu* functionaries also state that one substantial sector affecting Toraja cultural change is tourism sector. However, they notice the other side of this tourism development as the ancestor contribution for their descendant. In their language, “*tulang leluhur kami masih berjasa*” means “our ancestor’s bones are still meritorious”. Thus, it can be said that the indigenous realize yet negotiate with the situation where cultural tourism and mediatization of *Rambusolo* happen. Things they considered matters are young generation outside the tradition circle, the owners of *tongkonan* who establish foundation to manage *tongkonan*, and tourism areas in Toraja.

If note further, the cultural change in Toraja specifically related to *Rambusolo* performance indicates the existence of negotiation. This negotiation occurs both in concept and practice domain. Some parties, especially the indigenous stakeholders, aspire to maintain the philosophy of *Rambusolo* that is formed and arranged by *Aluktodolo* value system and belief. *Rambusolo* is genuinely performed to dispatch the soul to *Puya* (place of the soul) which belongs to mourning context. However, commodification practice as the result of mediatization and modernization is inevitable. Such practice shows the desacralization of *Rambusolo* and can be seen from *makpalao* and *rante* ritual part which are performed in esplanade, witnessed by the tourists.

Rambusolo, as a spiritual ceremony of *Aluktodolo* belief, is actually not a public display but a sacral ritual to dispatch the departed soul to *Puya*. This ritual, if done in accordance with *Aluktodolo* belief, is aimed to build connection with soul realm then by itself requires sanctity. The sanctity should be kept in order to let the family and relatives concentrate on the ritual to communicate with the ancestor spirit in the soul realm. This ritual is admittedly communal but only for family and clan.

On the other hand, the tourist attendance can disturb the sanctity as their purpose is not for condolence. This derives from the perception shaped in media that *Rambusolo* is unique and exotic. Then, their main interest is to get the fascinating and pleasuring display. This attitude and consideration that distinguish religious ritual and cultural tourism activity, as played out by the domestic and foreign tourists, Toraja local government, and North Toraja local government, can be classified as secularization.

In addition, desacralization of *Rambusolo* by media is evidently under state intervention. This is shown in Basis magazine article published in October 1947 about *Rambusolo* entitled “The Funeral in Toraja from Development Perspective”. On the basis of the analysis in this magazine, *Rambusolo* is concluded as,

“*Upacara kematian, atau lebih tepat paham keagamaan yang mendasari upacara kematian di Tana Toraja, menciptakan alam pikiran dan sikap yang merupakan perintang pembangunan*” (Hartoko, 1974 dalam Majalah Basis).

“Death ceremony, or more precisely religious tenet which underlie the funeral in Toraja, creating state of mind and attitude which obstruct development” (Hartoko, 1974 in Basis Magazine).

In October 1981, Basis magazine once again, published the review of Hetty Nooy-Palm, an anthropologist, writing about Toraja. In the last part of this review, this magazine emphasized the existence of secularization effort such as,

“Bagi setiap insan Indonesia yang berhasrat mengabadikan kebudayaan kelompok-kelompok etnis yang di Indonesia ratusan jumlahnya itu, buku ini merupakan perangsang yang berarti. Hal ini perlu dicamkan karena arus modernisasi cukup kuat melanda juga daerah-daerah pedesaan dan pedalaman yang diperkirakan sebagai daerah di mana kebudayaan asli masih bertahan...” (Daeng Hans, 1981 dalam majalah Basis)

“For every Indonesian who desires to perpetuate the hundreds of ethnic groups cultures in Indonesia, this book is such an important stimulus. This needs to be kept in mind as the modernization flow also quite strongly engulf the countryside and inland which are considered as areas where indigenous cultures still survive...”(Daeng Hans, 1981 in Basis Magazine)

Those two citations from Basis magazine show the secularization effort to separate traditional culture, including *Rambusolo*, from modern society. There is even the tendency to dismiss traditional life as stated in the first citation. Both writings from Basis, in historical context, were published in New Order era in the period of *Pembangunan Lima Tahun* (Five-Year Development) part 2. In this period, the ethnic culture regarded obstructing development is being criticized.

Nevertheless, at the same year where Basis criticizes *Rambusolo* as development obstacle in 1974, there is also Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) conference which was attended by representatives from 60 states. PATA is a conference focused on tourism sector. On the basis of data by Volkman, the number of foreign tourists has increased to 40.000 since 1974-1989. This success cannot be separated from mediatization impression through *Rambusolo* of Puang Sangalla documented by National Geographic in 1972. Therefore, in one side, media have great contribution in familiarizing *Rambusolo* nationally and internationally which its impact on the increasing number of foreign tourists. On the other side, unfortunately, media also have played considerable roles in desacralization and secularization of *Rambusolo*.

CONCLUSION

The media publications not simply put *Rambusolo* in travel feature but further have defined, promoted, and created the symbolic aspect of *Rambusolo* in tourism industry frame. It is disseminated as mystical, unique, exotic, original, and simultaneously imaged as tourist destination icon. This is intended to establish certain standard of value and inclination. It is constructed and expected to encourage the readers to visit Toraja and watch *Rambusolo*. The media try to affect the readers mind through news and reports by constructing certain diction which suggest *Rambusolo* “strange” or “unusual”. Some words used are such as “unik” (unique), “langka” (rare), “khas” (peculiar), “menarik” (interesting), and “eksotis” (exotic). *Rambusolo* as the form of mourning ritual which is originally belong to *Aluktodolo* belief institutionalization has now taken over by media.

This mediatization causes desacralization of *Rambusolo* which also affects the social relation change in Toraja community. The desecration is marked by its public accessible performance which attracts the tourists and others. Furthermore, there is also social interaction change related to the number of slaughtered buffaloes in ritual which shows the social strata of family in Toraja community.

Overall, the stakeholders respond differently to the orientation shift of *Rambusolo*. The government, youth, tourism practitioners, and tourist view this shift is legitimately proper. Besides developing the

media technology and information, this shift also generates *Rambusolo* globalization and gives significant progress to Toraja knowledge development. On the other side, the indigenous functionaries consider that the orientation should not be out of the Toraja culture philosophical framework in spite they admit to approve the cultural shift. Hereby, there is such negotiation process about the direction of *Rambusolo* shift orientation.

Finally, it is possibly ensued that *Rambusolo* will miss its genuine value then eventually be merely an amusing commercial event for tourists if this mediatization keeps going. Thus, this study suggests the stakeholders such as *tomina* and *toparengék* (indigenous functionary), the trustee of *Tongkonan* (a symbol of Toraja community clan), the government, tourism practitioners, social organizations, academics, and legislators to formalize a policy that not only supports the tourism promotion for commercial purpose but also advocates the transformation of *Rambusolo* value as a unifying ritual of Toraja community in order to preserve the symbolic aspect from commercial exploitation (desecralization). The stakeholders should have considered the importance of preservation and utilization effort of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expression of *Rambusolo*.

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