

Religious and Cultural Conversion by South Sulawesi Migrants: Hegemonizing Strategies in the Lowlands and Highlands of western Central Sulawesi

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Abstract

Analyses of the peoples of South Sulawesi – Bugis, Mandar, Makassarese, and others – as migrants throughout the Indonesian archipelago and beyond have all too often focussed exclusively upon the politico-economic success of these communities, often involving subordinating members of host societies in patron-client hierarchies and in marketing networks in the localities these migrants have occupied. However, such a focus obscures other cultural means by which Bugis and other South Sulawesi peoples have attempted to exercise dominance in diasporic communities. Bugis may bill themselves as carriers and disseminators of national ideologies and even transnational orientations, often serving as innovators in the introduction of national development programs (e.g. rice intensification, small-holder cash-cropping, etc.) in locales where they have settled. Dissemination of Islam has served as another vehicle to support their emergent dominance, as these migrants have established mosques and prayer houses as venues for the maintenance of their own Islam and for the conversion of others under their aegis in the regions of migration. This paper examines how Islam has been used as vehicle of domination during the era of Dutch colonial occupation as South Sulawesi migrants came to occupy positions of authority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in lowland Central Sulawesi.

However, South Sulawesi migrants have also established complex, often appropriative relationships to local cultural traditions, particularly in highland areas, such as the upland plains of western Central Sulawesi, where previous Christianisation of populations in this same time period has entailed resistance to Islamisation. As a case study, this paper examines the process of how Bugis migrants to the Lindu plain of Central Sulawesi have used the conceptions of hierarchy and genealogy they have brought from South Sulawesi to refashion the beliefs and traditions of the indigenous Lindu people and in the process have attempted to establish themselves as the proper intermediaries to the local spirit world. Such a strategy parallels their roles as political brokers to government officials and economic mediators through intermediate marketing, demonstrating how Bugis migrants use religious and cultural as well as political and economic means in an attempt not only to gain dominance, but even to exercise hegemony in areas of settlement.