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Working Title

Ancestors, Spirits, and Other Beings that Jeopardize Belonging: God and the Governance of Religion in Indonesian Multicultural Nationalism

Abstract

In Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country and third largest democracy, nationalism and governmentality converge within a multicultural framework in which social diversity is sublimated to a set of principles enshrined in the nation's founding document, Pancasila. Indonesian officials mobilize Pancasila to regulate religion, extending recognition to a mere six groups (Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists) which are lauded for their perceived international, monotheistic orientations. My paper scrutinizes this nationalist formation through the perspectives of Kejawen and Penghayat Kepercayaan Indonesians, two communities who take seriously traditions passed down from their ancestors, but who find their practices relegated to a stigmatized 'cultural' status. I argue that Indonesian nationalist discourses on moral character-formation share with transnationally-circulating, orthodox expressions of Islam a conception of personhood in which subjects are encouraged to cultivate ethical selves and sensibilities oriented toward one God. I contrast this with Kejawen and Penghayat Kepercayaan Indonesians for whom ethical personhood necessitates attending to a web of obligations to different beings including ancestors, spirits, and gods. My informants struggled to inhabit, or subvert, Islam and other religious identities by using coded word play or adapting the language of the state and Sunni majority to render their modes of relationality and personhood acceptable. My interlocutors' efforts to belong witness to the challenge posed by nationalist formations that mobilize conceptions of 'international' (or world) religions to manage their subjects.