

REINCARNATION IN AN ISLAMIC SOCIETY: BUTON, INDONESIA

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INTRODUCTION

Reincarnation is a belief that the soul, or some power, passes into another body after death. It is accepted by more than a billion people worldwide – Hindus, Buddhists, many New-Agers, and 27 percent of Australians.¹ Surprisingly, it has also been documented among the Butonese, an

¹ Cf. D. Burnett, *The Spirit of Hinduism: A Christian Perspective on Hindu Thought*, Tunbridge Wells UK: Monarch Publications, 1992; K. K. S. Ch'en, "The Teachings of the Buddha", in L. Smith, and W. Bodin, eds, *The Buddhist Tradition*, Niles IL: Argus Communications, 1978; P. Corney, *Change and the Church: How to initiate and manage constructive change in the local church*, Sydney South NSW: Aquila Press, 2000, pp. 14-15; H. Haring, and J. B. Metz, "Editorial: Reincarnation or Resurrection?: A Discussion Reopened", in *Concilium: Reincarnation or Resurrection?* 5 (October, 1993); V. Mangalwadi, "The Reincarnation of the Soul", in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 15-2 (April, 1991); G. Parrinder, *Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions*, Amersham UK: Hulton Educational, 1971; D. B. Schneider, "The End of Life: Nirvana", in L. Smith, and W. Bodin, eds, *The Buddhist Tradition*, Niles IL: Argus Communications, 1978; D. S. Toolan, "Reincarnation and Modern Gnosis", in *Concilium: Reincarnation or Resurrection?* 5 (October, 1993); R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1966.

unreached Muslim group in Indonesia² (Schoorl, 1985). Buton formally converted to Islam, following the conversion of Murham, Buton's sixth king, and first Sultan, in 1542 (Zahari, 1980). A Folk Islam developed that has assimilated Islamic beliefs and worship, with various forms of magic and superstition, shamanism, respect for ancestral spirits, and (according to Schoorl) reincarnation (cf. Berg, 1989; Donohue, 1995, p. 5; Johnson, 2003). If Butonese do have beliefs in reincarnation, this is not only unique, compared to other cultures, but also informative about the origins and nature of the Butonese religious mix. This paper will focus on reincarnation beliefs in Buton, drawing on Schoorl's findings, comparing them with traditional Hindu beliefs (which have had a historical influence in the area), and suggesting some implications for planting the gospel among the Butonese.

BUTONESE RELIGION: A COMPARISON WITH HINDUISM

The Hindu doctrine of reincarnation teaches that, after death, a person's soul, or life force (called *atman*), is reborn in another being, according to the law of *karma*. *Karma* is the thoughts, words, and actions that affect later lives. By following one's duty (*dharma*), one can accumulate good karmic effects, and return in a higher caste. Death and rebirth (*samsara*) is a repetitive, ongoing cycle; "To him that is born, death is sure. And for him who has died, birth is certain. This cannot be changed" (The *Bhagavad-gita* 2:27, in Johnson and Johnson, 1978). Salvation, for the Hindu, is release (*moksha*) from this, otherwise endless, cycle; "From the highest plant in the material world down to the lowest, all are places of misery, where repeated birth and death take place. But one who attains to My abode never takes birth again" (The *Bhagavad-gita* 8:16, in Prabhupada, 1983, p. 130). 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, special knowledge, or people with special power over when and where spirits will return.

² Reincarnation is as foreign to Islam as to Judaism and Christianity, although transmigration (Arabic *tanasukh*) did become popular among some Shi'a Muslims, especially in India, and the Isma'ilis believed souls could not be reborn until released by their *Iman* (priest) (Parrinder, *Dictionary of Non-Christian Religions*, p. 273).

Reincarnation ritual experts (*motaurakea* or *pasucu*) place the deceased in the grave in the correct way, and utter appropriate prayers. They stay with the body and the next of kin, after the mosque officials have left, and pray for the deceased's salvation: "O Lord, lend forgiveness to us and to him. Exalt his position among those who have received the right guidance, and replace him among his relatives. And give him light in there (his grave)." They also are expected to ensure the spirit, especially of those who died young, does not come back and annoy the living (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 108-109).

Besides the role of the *pasucu*, the special knowledge (*ilmu*) of the dying person is believed to be a strong determiner of reincarnation. People with *ilmu*, and who approach God closely, can determine when they die, and where their spirits go, and are known as saints (*wali ullah*). *Ilmu* can be learned, and is not restricted to the Butonese. For example, Governor-General Cornelis Speelman, who relieved Buton in 1667 from a 10,000-troop Makassarese siege, was initiated into the secret knowledge of how to make one's spirit return, by Sapati Baluwu. They agreed to return together to Buton, and reportedly fought together in the 1828-1829 war with Diponegoro³ (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 107-108).

It is said a good life, or good works (*amal*), may be rewarded with a better subsequent life. The Butonese system of estates function like Indian castes, with their own tasks. The *kaomu* are the nobility, *Walaka* are the middle level, and *Papara* are the commoners (and *Batua* are slaves or criminals) (cf. Bergink, 1987; Rudyansjah, 1997; Yamaguchi, 1999). If they are good, a *Papara* may be reborn as a child of a *Walaka*, *La Ode*, or even a *Sultan*. Spirits can also be punished for bad deeds, by being reborn in a lower estate, or as a woman. Schoorl did not hear any stories of returning as an animal, in the cultural centre for the Butonese people of Wolio (Baubau), but, in the village of Rongi, Schoorl's informants said a bad life

³ Speelman was reputed to be reincarnated later as Haji Abdul Ganiyu, or Kenepulu Bulu Sabandara, who assisted Sultan Muhammed Idrus (1824-1851) to persuade his subjects to give up superstitious practices, including ancestor worship. Yet Idrus' tract, *Ajonga Inda Malusa* outlines a philosophy of life and death, in which reincarnation has a place (J. W. Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton, SE Sulawesi, Indonesia", in *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde* 141-1 (1985), p. 107).

could cause a person to return as an animal, even a pig. Some villages have beliefs that spirits go to heaven, where they have to give an account to the Lord. If they have been good, they can return immediately. When they have sinned greatly, they may have to wait up to seven years, and then they may be born handicapped, or die early (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 106-111).

The Butonese concept of reincarnation does not dwell on *karma*, *amal*, or an endless cycle, 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.⁴ A woman’s dying father-in-law told her: “When I die, I shall come back to you. . . . Keep a piece of cotton-wool with moisture from my navel, as medicine for the child that will be born to you.” When her next child was born, her husband held his child, and whispered the call to prayer. The child murmured “yes, yes”, and urinated on him, and so the family believed the father-in-law had returned.⁵ 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. His mother could use

⁴ What, in India, is serious and painful, a cycle that never wants to end, is, in Buton, an opportunity for communicating with, and remembering, dead relatives (cf. Haring and Metz, “Editorial: Reincarnation”, p. ix). Keijke found reincarnation, in Africa, is believed to occur within families, and never in a perfect stranger (J. Keijke, “Belief in Reincarnation in Africa”, in *Concilium: Reincarnation or Resurrection?* 5 (October, 1993), p. 49). Okorochoa maintains Mali and Igbo reincarnation beliefs, in Africa, emphasise continuity within families, through the ancestral cult. The Mali morning prayer is “make me a gift of children [so] that *your name* may not be obliterated”. The perpetuity, they pray for, is not an endless life in a blissful heaven, but an extension of their being into the ancestral *sheol*, and so an ongoing relationship with the living. Similarly, the Igbo emphasise this desire, in the names they give their children. For example, *Ahamefula*, “May my name never be obliterated”, and *Nnamd*, “My father is still alive” (i.e., the lineage name lives on in *this* male offspring; because this male child has been born, we now affirm that our lineage will never become extinct) (C. Okorochoa, “The Meaning of Salvation: An African Perspective”, in W. Dyrness, ed., *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994, p. 84).

⁵ Another mother knew which relative returned in three of her four children, because of similar appearance and certain signs. In Hendeya, bodies are given marks, to be found on children later (Schoorl, “Belief in reincarnation on Buton”, pp. 105, 117).

the jewels, he offered, but had to look after them. Children are not told about whom has returned in them, for fear the spirit may be embarrassed (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 104-117).

ORIGINS OF BUTONESE REINCARNATION BELIEFS

Reincarnation beliefs may have derived from one or more of three sources: traditional Butonese beliefs, Sufism, or Javanese Hinduism. Reincarnation beliefs could have been present in traditional pre-Islamic and pre-Hindu Buton, as in a few other Indonesian groups, like the Kayang Makassarese, in neighbouring South Sulawesi (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 120-122). Even in these groups, though, the belief may be attributable to a Hindu influence, though, perhaps, predating Javanese Hindu influence. This would be consistent with reincarnation beliefs that are not consonant with classical Hinduism, with little reference to *karma* and ultimate redemption, though Buton (and these other groups) may have adopted or assimilated only those parts of reincarnation that fitted their existing cultural system (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 120-122).

Sufism could have tolerated divergent ideas like reincarnation, but there is no mention of reincarnation in the literature on Indonesian Sufism (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 123-124, 131). Perhaps reincarnation was accepted in Buton, partly because of the mystical influence of Sufism, and its relative detachment from orthodoxy. (I am unsure of the historical influence and importance of Sufism in the area, or whether there are Butonese people, who practice Sufism, and how widespread it is, but it could be fruitful to investigate.) Kenneth Cragg suggests mystics “are well known for their relative detachment from canons of orthodoxy, and for the way in which they are apt to become, doctrinally, a law unto themselves” (Cragg, 1959, fn. 416, p. 80, in Parshall, 1983, p. 25).

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.⁶ Furthermore, oral traditions

⁶ Buton’s first ruler (*raja*) was Queen Wa-Kaa-Kaa, reputedly the daughter of Kubilai Khan, who married Mojopahit prince Sibatara. The third and fourth *rajas* Bataraguru

indicate early Hindu presence in the region.⁷ More precisely, there are resemblances between the Butonese understanding of reincarnation and the notion of reincarnation in (Central) Java, as described by Geertz:

Often, but not always, reincarnation occurs within the same family, although the relationship may be rather distant, and the individual, in whom the soul is reincarnated, need not necessarily be of the same sex as the deceased. It may be heralded by a dream, on the part of the mother, or established by a similarity of features in the child and the recently deceased, or by a similar birthmark. It is not wise to tell a child when it is still young of whom it is a reincarnation, for this might make the soul within the child ashamed, and he would fall sick (Geertz, 1960, pp. 75-76; in Schoorl, 1985, p. 123).

Java, also, has people who claim secret knowledge for determining in which family they will return (Wilken, 1912, pp. 64-71; in Schoorl, 1985, p. 123). There is no important place for traditional Hindu concepts of *karma*, or ultimate redemption and eternal peace, in either beliefs. There are differences of opinion about how reincarnation occurs (as there are within Buton). Nevertheless, the clear correspondence of Javanese (according to Geertz) and Butonese (according to Schoorl) notions of reincarnation, together with the evidence of Mojopahit influence on early Buton, makes for a good case for Mojopahit borrowing (Schoorl, 1985, p. 125). The

and Tuarade, visited Mojopahit's court. Their names further suggest their Hindu-Javanese connections. Sibatara Batara Guru is the name of the supreme deity, while Batara was also used as a *raja's* title. Tuarade is probably a combination of *tuan* (lord = Indonesian) and *raden* a Javanese title for a noble (Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton", p. 103, 122, 130; Yamaguchi, *Cultural representations of the historical past*, p. 10; Zahari, *Sejarah dan adat fity darul Butuni*, pp. 38-40). Some locals deny Hindu Mojopahit influence in early Buton, though this may say more about their desires for orthodoxy (or the appearance of orthodoxy) than historical accuracy (Yamaguchi, *Cultural representations of the historical past*).

⁷ After Sultan Murhum's conversion, all Buton was obliged to formally convert to Islam. A group of Javanese Hindus, who had left Mojopahit after its Islamisation, refused. They preferred voluntary death, and dug their own mass grave on Buton's south coast. A village ruler also converted to Islam, and, when he died, was buried. His subjects were upset, as they were still mostly Hindu, and wanted his body cremated (Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton", pp. 103-104).

majority of available evidence is that the belief was derived from, or, at least, was reshaped by, Hindu, and, in particular, Hindu-Javanese Mojopahit influence.

A CASE OF SYNCRETISM?

If reincarnation is a leftover from Javanese Hindu influence, Buton's conversion to Islam has not eradicated the belief. In fact, Schoorl reports the village Rongi learned of reincarnation from the cultural/religious centre (Baubau) as a component of Islam.⁸ Schoorl's informants held a belief, both in reincarnation and the orthodox Islamic view, that all the spirits of the dead wait for the last day, *hari kiamat*, where they are judged, based on their works, despite the fact that these two beliefs appear to be mutually incompatible. They find their beliefs in reincarnation affirmed by Al Qu'ran 3:27; "Thou makest the night to enter into the day, and Thou makest the day to enter into the night. Thou bringest forth the living from the dead, and Thou bringest forth the dead from the living, and Thou providest whomsoever Thou wilt without reckoning."⁹ For spirits of those who have been dead for a long time, these words may be prayed; "Thou hast power to arrange everything. We do not know if the spirit is still in the grave, or has migrated to another body, but Thou hast the power to arrange everything" (Schoorl, 1985, pp. 118, 129).

Among the Butonese, Islam seems to coexist with a belief in reincarnation and some animistic beliefs, like shamanism, offerings, and guardian spirits. Children still sprinkle water and pray over ancestors' graves, even though

⁸ The royalty in Baubau kept the core of religion in the centre of political power (i.e., Baubau), to ensure the dependence and loyalty of the villagers. Further, different *kadies* (define) were given not only different tasks, but different religious information (Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton", p. 124; 1994, pp. 50-54).

⁹ The Sultanate legislation *Murtabat Tujuh* also specifies that spirits migrate using the Arabic word *roh* "going":

oro hi yitu akalipa-lipa, rohi yitu ooni arabu, maanana oli pa (Wolio).

Dalam arti bahasa Arab nyawa itu disebut roh, karena selalu pergi; atau berpindah dan sebab itu arti roh dalam bahasa Wolio dikatakan lipa artinya pergi (translated and explained in Indonesian).

The Spirit is in (a process of continuous) going (literally in English) (Schoorl, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton", p. 118).

they believe their ancestors have been reincarnated.¹⁰ School suggests Butonese hold different complexes of ideas that coexist (almost independently of one another), and, among which, they do not feel the need to establish logical relations (1985, p. 124). Butonese believe in magic, ancestral spirits, reincarnation, and Islamic notions, ideas probably all derived from different historical periods, which have remained in Buton's unique religious mix, for use in different contexts.¹¹

MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BUTONESE REINCARNATION BELIEFS

THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This section has been based on a literature comparison of Butonese reincarnation (relying on School) and classical Hindu beliefs. This methodology is deficient in two main ways. Firstly, it is based on literature (and only one old article), rather than personal and contemporary ethnographic research. Future research could verify School's findings, and show whether belief in reincarnation among the Butonese people has changed. Recent efforts of orthodox Muslim groups may have relegated the belief in reincarnation to a minority of Butonese. A further possibility is that Indonesian Sufism may have given such beliefs more room in Butonese religious identity (School, 1985, p. 125). Secondly, this paper

¹⁰ Some believe there is still a link with the spirit of the deceased person in the grave, or that it is not the entire *arwah* (spirit) that returns (School, "Belief in reincarnation on Buton", p. 124).

¹¹ This is not untypical in the world of Islam. Although practices often contradict formal Islam, those who practice Folk Islam rarely see themselves as syncretistic. For Butonese, there is no inconsistency in beliefs and practices (R. D. Love, "Church Planting among Folk Muslims", in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 11-2 (April, 1994), p. 86; cf. J. M. Atkinson, "Religions in dialogue: the construction of an Indonesian minority religion", in *American Ethnologist* 10 (1983), p. 694; S. Cederroth, "Perceptions of Sasak Identity", in M. Hitchcock, and V. T. King, eds, *Images of Malay-Indonesian Identity*, Kuala Lumpur Malaysia: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 165-167; K. Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque*, London UK: SCM Press, 1959, p. 32; P. G. Gowing, *Muslim Filipinos: Heritage and Horizon*, Quezon City Phil: New Day Publishers, 1979, pp. 68-69; C. Kiem, "Re-Islamisation among Muslim Youth in Ternate Town, Eastern Indonesia", in *Sojourn: Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 92-127; P. Parshall, *Bridges to Islam: A Christian Perspective on Islam*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1983, p. 17).

used Hindu categories as a springboard to analyse Butonese reincarnation. This may be helpful in evaluating possible Hindu origins of the belief, but may force foreign categories onto the Butonese worldview. Through interaction and dialogue, further understanding is needed about Butonese culture and reincarnation beliefs, according to their categories. Research is needed to explore what felt needs are answered by stories of, and belief in, reincarnation, and how the gospel could connect with Butonese beliefs.¹²

The Need to Respond to Felt Needs

Butonese, like other folk Muslims, want their felt needs met. Hiebert maintains Muslim resistance to the gospel exists, not only because of differences in belief and historical confrontations, but also because of “our failure to deal with the common people’s felt needs . . . [overlooking] the fact that most Muslims turn to a mixture of Muslim and animistic practices for answers to everyday problems” (1989, p. 45). Schreiter argues popular, or folk, religion addresses basic human needs that have to be addressed to win the adherence of a culture:

To develop local theologies, then, one must listen to popular religion, in order to find out what is moving in people’s lives. Only then can local theologies be developed, and the liberating power of the gospel come to its full flower (1985, p. 143).

Further research will hopefully clarify Butonese felt needs. Speculatively, 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. (It could be fruitful to compare Christian and

¹² (Cf. P. Hiebert, “Form and Meaning in Contextualisation of the Gospel”, in D. S. Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us: Contextualising Theology for Mission Today*, Dallas TX: Word Publications, 1989; S. J. Samartha, “Indian Realities and the Wholeness of Christ”, in *Missiology: An International Review* X-3 (1982)). An anonymous comment to an earlier draft of this paper suggested that School’s references to the existence of syncretistic and mutually-incompatible beliefs also raise questions for the introduction of teaching about Jesus and Christian doctrine. Further research could also investigate how syncretism can be minimised, or avoided, among future believers in Jesus. Is the current syncretism a result of the manner in which Islam was introduced to the Butonese people – via force or decree “from the centre”, rather than via personal acceptance, and a change of heart?

Islamic teachings about hope, certainty concerning the afterlife, and continuity of existence, to see what is, and what is not, provided in the two religions.) 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).

THE NEED TO TEACH RESURRECTION FAITH

Just as we need to be diligent in understanding beliefs, and the felt needs they express, it will be appropriate to be patient with inquirers, and new believers, as they grapple with how the gospel challenges, or fulfils, those beliefs (Parshall, 1983, p. 19). Nevertheless, the goal will be to teach the belief that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all people (including Butonese) can have hope in the resurrection (John 11:20-44; 1 Cor 15:12-21). This is not earned by *amal*, or manipulated by *ilmu*, but received by grace through faith. It is not something that follows any number of rebirths, but one unrepeatably life, and it involves the whole person, not just an immortal soul (Loning, 1993; Sachs, 1993; Tracy, 1993). *Pasucu* cannot help anyone's final destiny, because eternal life depends on people's own response. It was beyond this study to explore how the Christian faith in resurrection differs from the Islamic concept, but Mangalwadi contends the Christian hope is qualitatively different from both reincarnation and Islamic resurrection:

Neither a crass, materialistic resurrection, as in Islam, nor a spiritualised reincarnation, as in Hinduism, can satisfy the human longing for peace and justice, now and eternally. The resurrection of Jesus Christ holds the key to our understanding of the solution to the present political, economic, and ecological crises, and the meaning of death, and life beyond death (1991).

In the light of Butonese understandings about the spirit-world, the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Christ may assume great importance in a Butonese ethnotheology (as Bediako argues for his African context) (Bediako, 1994; Kraft, 1979). Butonese ancestors are honoured, but Christ is our greatest ancestor. Our natural ancestors did not choose to

be born as our ancestors, but Jesus did choose to be our ancestor, out of love and commitment to us. He lived for a while among us (John 1:14), and is not ashamed to call us His siblings (Heb 2). He has returned to the Spirit realm, and to a place of supreme power and Lordship over everything (Phil 2:9-11), and offers to prepare a place for us there (John 14:1-4). This is a part of Butonese life, to which the gospel can relate.

CONCLUSION

Buton has an almost unique belief in reincarnation. The belief differs from classical Hindu doctrine, which focuses on *karma* and redemption. Butonese reincarnation focuses more on identifying ancestors. It depends on the powers of ritual experts, the deceased's special knowledge, and good works. The evidence suggests the belief was derived from the Hindu-Javanese Mojopahit kingdom. It has not been supplanted, but has been reconciled, in a complex of beliefs with Islam. This complex of beliefs, or "Butonese religion", needs to be understood on its own terms, for the gospel to be addressed to the felt needs that reincarnation stories meet. Resurrection faith (rather than *amal*, *ilmu*, or *pasucu*) offers hope for life forever with God, and with His family.

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