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# Toben Lewo: Social Safety Nets Within The Framework of Religious Moderation

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## Abstract

*Conducting the toben lewo ritual, the religious community in Botung village organizes, interprets, and reconstructs their lives within the framework of achieving collective salvation. Salvation is manifested in socio-religious harmony, which is also an implication of the mainstreaming of religious moderation in Indonesia. This study elaborates three main questions of the toben lewo' rituals practices, how Botung community interpret the rituals, and implication of the rituals to grounding religious moderation in Indonesia. A qualitative method was selected with the aim of exploring the knowledge, experiences, opinions, and feelings of informants regarding the toben lewo ritual as a social salvation system in the context of religious moderation. The study was conducted in Botung village, Adonara Island, East Flores Regency. The techniques of data collection were observation, interviews, and document studies. The data collection was collected from September 2021 to May 2023. Primary data was obtained by conducting structured interviews with ritual participants and the representation of women and youth. The secondary data were from previous studies and documentary photographs. The findings revealed that by carrying out the toben lewo ritual, the village will be freed from guilt as the cause of disasters and calamities, which disrupt its relationship with the divine, ancestors, humans, and the universe. The ritual serves to restore and mend these three-dimensional relationships. The ritual brings forth and affirms harmony with the divine, ancestors, people, and the universe. This study can serve as a gateway to promote the idealism of religious moderation in Indonesia and enrich the knowledge in the fields of sociology and anthropology.*

## Keywords

*Toben Lewo, Salvation, Religious Moderation*

## INTRODUCTION

The toben lewo ritual, as a means to bring communal salvation to the inhabitants of Botung Village, East Flores, serves as a medium to embody the values and objectives of religious moderation such as tolerance and inclusive brotherhood. This ritual, similar to the annual ritual of the Bugis Tolotang Towani community in Perrinyameng, Sidenreng Rappang Regency, is held to attain salvation and blessings

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from *Dēwata Sēuwaē* (the Almighty God) or also referred to as *Patotoe*, which signifies the Determiner of Human Destiny. The annual ritual serves as a gathering for Bugis Tolotang Towani residents from various regions such as South Sulawesi, Kalimantan, Sumatra, and Java, and embodies cultural values of unity and mutual cooperation. Similarly, the ritual resembles the *Saparan* ritual in Sleker Village, Kopeng Subdistrict, Semarang Regency, which is performed to ward off calamities or epidemics (*pagebluk*), and is in line with the *Wahyu Kliku* ritual in Kendal Village, Karanganyar, which is performed to reject *pagebluk*. A similar ritual is also conducted by the residents of Betung Village, Pangkalan Kuras Subdistrict, Pelalawan Regency, Riau Province, through a disaster avoidance ritual. The ultimate goal is the individual and communal safety of the community (Hasbullah et al., 2017).

While these studies do not specifically touch on the concept of religious moderation, they have led to the theme of religious moderation by mentioning several keywords such as unity, harmony, respect, and appreciation for human dignity. First, how the *toben lewo* ritual is conducted. Second, how the people of Botung interpret the ritual. Third, the implications of the ritual in embodying religious moderation in Indonesia. To complement these studies, this research specifically explores the meaning and value of the *toben lewo* ritual in East Flores, NTT, and its implications for efforts to embody religious moderation in Indonesia. Therefore, three main issues are discussed in this study.

This study positions *toben lewo* as one of the cultural expressions of the social system and religious system according to Koentjaraningrat's classification (2010). For the people of Botung, *toben lewo* is both a social and religious activity. The *toben lewo* ritual embodies the intention of present and future salvation. Salvation can be interpreted as the creation of harmonious relations among people of different religious backgrounds. Thus, the *toben lewo* ritual correlates with the embodiment of religious moderation. Harmonious relations form the basis of the aspiration for peaceful coexistence among religious communities, which is the ultimate goal of mainstreaming the idea of religious moderation. The Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs views religious moderation as a development priority and part of the cultural strategy to advance human resources (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019; Rohmadi et al., 2022). The Ministry of Religious Affairs defines religious moderation as a balanced religious attitude between one's own religious practice and respect for the religious practices of others with different beliefs. The goal is to prevent individuals and groups

from adopting extreme, fanatic, and revolutionary attitudes in religion (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2019; Zahra et al., 2022). In a more specific context, with religious moderation, every religious adherent is expected to be willing to guide and adapt their behavior and attitudes according to their environment and prevailing cultural standards (Sihombing et al., 2020; Mahardhani, 2022; Rodiah Nur et al., 2023). The ultimate goal is to create social harmony and coexistence (Awal et al., 2023; Taufik, 2022).

## METHOD

The qualitative method is employed to support the achievement of research goals by exploring and analyzing the knowledge, experiences, opinions, and feelings of informants regarding the toben lewo ritual within the framework of sociology-anthropology (Ratna, 2010; McCutcheon, 2005) as a social safety net system within the context of religious moderation. The research location is the village of Botung on Adonara Island, East Flores Regency. Observation, interviews, and document studies are selected as data collection techniques. Data collection took place from September 2021 to May 2023. Primary data consists of structured interviews with cultural figures as key informants and members of the community actively involved in activities within the community (adults and youth), totaling 15 individuals. Interviews focus on aspects of knowledge, experience, opinions, and feelings regarding the toben lewo ritual. Secondary data includes documentation of images related to this ritual and references related to the research theme. All collected data are classified, compared, and interpreted to uncover the underlying meanings and relate them to relevant references.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Structure and Substance of the Toben Lewo Ritual

*Toben lewo* implemented by the community of Botung Village, Wotan Ulumado District, on Adonara Island. The expression "toben lewo" carries the meaning of building or revitalizing the village, or inspiring the village. The toben lewo ritual is led by the *kapitan pito pegawe lema* (traditional leaders), consisting of a chairman and

representatives from the clans, namely the Lewo Irak, Wungbelen-Lama Lobek, Lamapao-Samsoge, Lewo Auk, and Lemuda clans.<sup>1</sup>

This ritual follows a specific sequence: Firstly, "toling lewo." The main activity during "toling lewo" is cleaning the village, especially the area known as "namang." All villagers participate and take part in this activity. Secondly, prayer. The main essence of the prayer includes: protection from disasters (crop pests), illnesses; safeguarding the village's safety, the inhabitants of the village, and those abroad.

"Gurung gawek hugelene na loit lodo rebaun na gurun gere. Turu juga noon lewo turu, hogo noon lewo hogo. Pana noon lewo pana, balik noon lewo balik. Nuun sina mayan jawa, hugelen tou rebaun lola. Pana ake maan gasik tuun, gawa ake maan gait wulan."

Meaning: Like a hen descends in the morning, bringing its chicks down from the tree, and in the evening, it leads them back to their coop, may we walk together with God and the ancestors of *Lewotamah*, and may illnesses and diseases not linger.

In the expression of the Botung community, the hope for safety is expressed with the words: "Pana ake maan todok, gawe ake maan bulet," which means may the life journey of every villager and those living abroad be free from obstacles and disturbances.

Thirdly, "bau lolon" takes place. The ritual leader takes seven pieces of cotton (representing the 7 clans) and hands them over to the traditional leaders. The leaders touch the cotton as a sign of unity for "bau lolon." The main substance used for "bau lolon" is white palm wine. The essence of "bau lolon" is pouring the white palm wine onto the ground as a symbol of offering or sharing with the ancestors before humans taste it. Then, the palm wine is poured into the center of the "nuba namang tukan" (a kind of offering altar) accompanied by the sound of gongs and drums by the attendees, indicating that the ritual has begun.

Fourthly, "keniki wai" (provisions like rice cakes/tobi/sour seeds/sour fruits/mangrove fruits/ancestral food during famine) is prepared and placed in the traditional house. This activity is carried out at night. These provisions are prepared as offerings for "ema belen" (spiritual beings), and "bapa belolon" (rats and crop pests).

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with the Traditional Chief/Belen Lewo, Antonius Masang, accompanied by the traditional figures who are members of the Kapitan Pito Pegawe Lema (Martinus Dani, Wilhelmus Payong, Simon Suba Ama, and Herman Gusti Ama) in Botung Village on October 10, 2022

The next morning, "keniki wai" is sent to the sea and to the mountains (*lau gere, rae pana, klean kleite lau tena gere pnesong penegor lau tanah pana*) by the attendees who are seen as capable of traveling long distances on foot. If any part of the "keniki wai" falls on the ground during the journey, it is not immediately picked up. The method for picking it up is by placing a white cotton on the ground surface and the fallen part is then picked up and placed on the cotton. If such action is not taken, the person who dropped it will always be haunted by the feeling that something is missing from their belongings and they must find out what is missing. If the journey is exhausting, the bearers must place the "keniki wai" on the cotton as a cushion before resting. Upon reaching the beach, the "keniki wai" is tied with stones as weights and then submerged in the sea. The "keniki wai" sent to the mountainous areas will be directed to two places: "krome ina" (a stone shaped like a rat) and "nayu baya" (the place of the "peace oath" between the Paji and Demon parties). (Bebe, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

The "keniki wai" is placed on two stones, where Nene Uto (Demon) and Nene Pria (Paji) sit. There is a brief prayer recited during the release of the "keniki wai." "Kakan di too arin hala, arin di too kakan hala. Kakan too arin nolo, mata book knogok, lolat bobo namo tapo." This sentence means "may there be no more consecutive deaths, hardships, and suffering."

Fifthly, "Tanyan Ketene di Lagan." In the evening, the attendees gather again at Lagan (a seating area in front of the traditional house). The traditional chief, the clan leaders, and the attendees unite in a communal meal event. All household heads are required to attend this communal meal event. The food is prepared from each household. Three communities are present in this event: from Samsoge Village, Bloto, and Lewo Au. The communal meal event can only begin once all the food is available in front of each household head. Before eating, the traditional leaders perform the "pao kewokot" ritual (to give thanks for the harvest obtained throughout the year) by pouring rice, vegetables, dishes, and palm wine onto the ground as offerings to the

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<sup>2</sup> Paji and Demon (fully, Demon Nara-Paji Nara) are two clans of the Lamaholot tribe who originally lived as siblings but later became hostile to each other due to issues such as land disputes. Literally, Demon Nara-Paji Nara means Demon and Paji, two siblings (Nara: siblings-allies). Stories about them often appear in Lamaholot myths but are also real in everyday life until now. According to the Traditional Chief/Belen Lewo of Botung Village, Antonius Masang, the traditional oath of Nayu Baya for the manifestation of peace between Demon and Paji occurred by: The hand is cut until it bleeds, then mixed with Tuak (palm wine), and each party exchanges and drinks the mixture as a sign of peace agreement. Currently, in the Toben Lewo ritual, this moment is interpreted as a renewal of the peace agreement between the conflicting parties.

ancestors and Lera Wulan. The phrase "*Kedoko hogo bae tia tobo tue pae paret* (please listen to our prayers), *go molo menu wahane* (the first food and drink), *ola usi nodi ehin here usi nodi wain* (let the work be small but yield plenty with the blessing of the ancestors and Lera Wulan)" is recited.

Sixthly, "Hedung" (Dance). The Hedung dance is performed to welcome guests from other villages who wish to attend the event. It is carried out after the communal meal event to welcome residents from neighboring villages who wish to participate in the event. However, they are not allowed to take part in the communal meal event. Therefore, they can only join after the communal meal event, and their presence is welcomed with the Hedung dance.

Seventhly, "sole oha." This part consists of a collective dance as a way to commemorate the life stories of ancestors passed down from one generation to the next. This dance also signifies expressing gratitude in togetherness.

Eighthly, "goleng lewo-look manuk" (releasing chickens as a symbol of protecting the village from disasters). Before releasing the chicken, it is touched by the kapitan pito like touching cotton and accompanied by the sound of gongs and drums by the attendees. Before release, the chicken is taken around the village five times. At each stop, a white and yellow cotton are alternately released (first stop white, second yellow, third white, and so on). Goleng Lewo-Look Manuk is led by the traditional chief. Afterward, they enter the "namang" and are greeted with the Hedung dance.

Ninthly, "*gemoka lewo*." The essence of this part is to summon the ancestors and Lera Wulan Tana Ekan to protect the "lewo" (village). "*Lein lau weran rae, hikun teti wana lali. Biti itine keria hadin kewato, koto nogo lein dein, one peten matan tia*." After this "prayer" is offered, all present cheer enthusiastically as the Traditional Chief releases a rooster. The released rooster serves as an "information medium" for the indigenous community. It is believed that if there is a calamity, disaster, or event affecting the village and its residents, the rooster will signal beforehand. The signal is interpreted by the traditional leaders, and the interpretation results are conveyed to the attendees. The rooster will be caught in the next year's ritual season.

### **Knowledge of the community about Toben Lewo**

*Toben Lewo* is seen as an annual traditional ceremony conducted to express gratitude for the blessings and provisions received throughout the year. It is an annual ritual performed by several villages in the Wotan Ulumado district to seek blessings

and protection from the Highest Being and ancestors. *Toben Lewo* is equivalent to "hiba mila" or "tolak bala," aiming to ward off all diseases that may come to the village in the following year (I-3, I-5, I-7, I-8, I-10, I-12). However, the most striking view among the informants regarding the ritual is that *Toben Lewo* serves as a means or medium to foster unity and solidarity among community members.

If connected with the objectives of the ritual as expressed by the informants, this striking view is reinforced. Here are excerpts of the opinions of the informants regarding the purpose of this ritual.

"So that the community, may live well, safely, and be kept away from all kinds of diseases and other dangers" (I-3).

"To strengthen the sense of brotherhood/sisterhood among the community." (I-6).

"Self-cleansing through saliva on cotton and disposed into the sea" (I-7)

"May everyone live healthily, take care of themselves, and safeguard the village" (I-8)

"Experience a new life atmosphere and unearth new spirits" (I-9)

"Revive the spirit of the younger generation; Preserve life in Lewotamah (the village)" I-10

"Erasing sins symbolized by 'cotton'. Those involved in the Toben Lewo ritual cleanse themselves" (I-11).

"Listen to the advice from the elders (koda kiri adat/advice-messages), Self-purification and erasing mistakes" (I-12).

The terms or words such as living well, living safely, brotherhood, and safety used by the informants above indicate the fundamental character of the Toben Lewo ritual, which is to bring individual and communal safety to its followers. This safety leads to collective goodness as residents of Lewo (village) without distinguishing the background and religious identity of the practitioners of this ritual.

This view is further strengthened by the interpretation and messages drawn by informants from the implementation of this ritual. Toben Lewo is perceived as a ritual that brings about a renewal of attitudes and influences the social character of

individuals and the community involved in it. The strongest message and meaning are unity and brotherhood. Toben Lewo becomes a medium that strengthens the bonds of unity and brotherhood among Christian and Muslim believers who hold and actively participate in this ritual. Below are excerpts of the meaning and message of the ritual from the informants:

“Self-renewal such as attitudes, behaviors, speech, work patterns, and other aspects of social life” (I-1).

“All members of the community are united in this ritual, and they are also ready to carry out the advice from the elders regarding their respective tasks and duties” (I-3)

“The presence of brotherhood, solidarity in living together” (I-9)

“Exploring the strength of Lewotamah to be applied in every service task undertaken” (I-10)

“Nurturing a sense of unity within the framework of epu rebun (kinship)” (I-11)

“Toben Lewo unites us all, both those within this village and those outside, even our ancestors who have gone before us” (I-12)

### ***Toben Lewo and the Idealism about Salvation***

Through the Toben Lewo ritual, the participating community organizes, interprets, and reconstructs their lives. In this ritual, a rooster is presented as an informant to the ribu ratu (community) through the kabelen lewo (cultural custodian) about extraordinary events (deaths, disasters). The ultimate intention is to protect the village from disasters and calamities. Therefore, the ritual encourages all members of the village to walk together towards collective safety while expressing gratitude to the 'holy one' referred to as Lera Wulan Tana Ekan (Almighty God) for all the achievements and successes attained.

In general, this ritual is seen as a path to achieve both individual and communal safety. Within it, a system of knowledge and values inherited from ancestors is found, closely related to experiences of suffering and social salvation. The community believes that the ritual ensures the establishment of social stability (free from errors, obtaining safety, and abundant blessings).



The ritual components are arranged in such a way as to present and provide a place for *Lera Wulan Tana Ekan*, who inhabits the metaphysical world, as well as for the 'social' entities (humans and the universe) that occupy the physical world. For the Botung community, which is part of the Lamaholot ethnic group of Flores in general, these two worlds are inseparable entities.

Through the ritual, the sacred is approached and invoked to participate and dominate space and time in their entire lives, especially when they are facing disharmony in life. *Lera Wulan Tana Ekan* and the ancestors in the metaphysical realm, believed to possess unlimited power, become the figures on whom the community relies for the ideal of life's salvation.

The ritual serves as a means for its practitioners to build relationships and communicate with the sacred (*Lera Wulan Tana Ekan*) and with the ancestors. The intensity of these relationships and communications through the ritual occurs when individuals, clans, and village communities are facing issues that require intervention from the sacred and the ancestors. Through the ritual, the community believes that intervention from the sacred and the ancestors brings salvation to them.

In their concept, salvation is both dimensional - present and future. The present dimension means that an individual, clan, or village that has committed wrongdoings is freed from those wrongs that have disturbed and severed their relationship with the sacred, ancestors, humans, and the universe. Meanwhile, the future dimension implies that through the ritual, the family or descendants of the perpetrator also experience salvation in the times to come. Essentially, the ritual restores or repairs the tri-dimensional relationship (*Lera Wulan Tana Ekan*, humans, and the universe) that has been disrupted due to someone's or a group's wrongdoings. Through the ritual, the cohesiveness and harmony with *Lera Wulan Tana Ekan* as the sacred, ancestors, humans, and the universe are reintroduced and reaffirmed.

The belief of the Botung community is communal belief, expressed in togetherness. The ritual is performed within the community of tradition or tribal community collectively under the leadership of the *belen lewo* (custodian of tradition), clans, and villages. Through the ritual, a cohesive relationship is created between the ritual participants (living humans), ancestors, and *Lera Wulan Tana Ekan*.

The cohesion among them gives birth to religious values. The community also believes that ancestors and the sacred (*Lera Wulan Tana Ekan*) play a crucial role in

creating and affirming tranquility, harmony, and salvation in their lives, both in the present and in the future. Through words (*koda*), objects presented, and symbolic actions or gestures in rituals, the search for the path to salvation and the idealism of cohesion and harmonization of life are reconstructed.

### ***Toben lewo* and the Idealism of Religious Moderation**

The idealism and aspirations of religious moderation have been initiated by the *Botung* community through the practice of the *toben lewo* ritual as one of its religious and social activities. The concept of salvation presented in this ritual can be seen as a convergence point with the idealism and aspirations of religious moderation in Indonesia. In this regard, the *toben lewo* ritual can be considered as part of efforts to promote religious harmony in East Flores, particularly, and in East Nusa Tenggara and Indonesia in general. The concept of harmony referred to here is based on the Joint Regulation of the Minister of Religion and the Minister of Home Affairs Number 9 of 2006/8 of 2006. This regulation formulates harmony as the state of relations among religious communities based on tolerance, mutual understanding, mutual respect, and appreciation; equality in practicing religious teachings; and cooperation in community life, nationhood, and statehood within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Masyhuri, 2019).

From this perspective, the *toben lewo* ritual can be seen as an entry point to support efforts in mainstreaming the idea of religious moderation. The *Botung* community, despite their different religious backgrounds, is gathered and unified in the *toben lewo* ritual to walk together towards shared salvation. The distinctive character interpreted from the *toben lewo* ritual is expressed in phrases such as living well, living safely, brotherhood, and salvation (Atasoge et al., 2022). That the *toben lewo* aims to bring about shared goodness and safety (Mahardhani, 2022). In other words, through *toben lewo*, the bonds of unity and brotherhood among Christians and Muslims who hold this ritual and actively participate in it are strengthened under the one and same God referred to as *Lera Wulan Tanah Ekan* (Ahnaf et al., 2015; Mila & Kolambani, 2020; Fajriyah et al., 2017).

The ritual practices aimed for strengthening religious moderation serves as a shared space for fostering openness among members of one religious' community toward those of other communities and beliefs. This openness creates an opportunity for mutual understanding, acknowledgment, and respect for differences. The ultimate

goal of this process is the realization of the common good. In the context of this study, the common good is understood as harmonious coexistence among religious communities, which is the ultimate aspiration of religious moderation. From this perspective, religious moderation becomes the key to create an atmosphere of tolerance and harmony in the shared life of religious communities in Indonesia (Salim, 2022; Pasaribu et al., 2023; Sukrawati et al., 2023). *Toben Lewo* playing a crucial role in reinforcing the concept of religious moderation.

*Toben lewo* guides its practitioners to prioritize harmonious living, mutual respect, and mutual care and protection. It is in this position that religious moderation will culminate without causing conflict due to differences in religious and cultural backgrounds. The differences present in the land of Indonesia cannot be reduced to a homogeneous unity. Differences have become a natural diversity. They simultaneously become the wealth of the Indonesian nation and state. They also become markers of Indonesia's multi-religious, multicultural, and multi-ethnic identity. Religious moderation becomes the path to maintaining and preserving Indonesia in such harmony. (Mujahid, 2023; Muttaqin, 2023; Khotijah & Kasidi, 2022).

A moderate approach to religion is reflected in four key aspects. First, a commitment to national unity that values diversity. Second, tolerance that respects differences in beliefs. Third, the rejection of all forms of violence in the name of religion. Fourth, acceptance and accommodation of the rich cultural and traditional heritage that thrives within society. Essentially, religious moderation encompasses teachings, principles, and values that guide individuals in practicing their faith, particularly in fostering healthy and positive relationships with others, both within the same religion and across different religions (Rahman et al., 2022).

The intersection between the ritual practice of *toben lewo* and the ideals of religious moderation encourages local cultural practitioners and religious adherents to foster harmony in living within diversity. (Harahap et al., 2023). Therefore, in the context of religious diversity and its willingness to engage with or accommodate local culture, this approach will guide religious adherents and communities toward a permissive attitude toward inclusive and tolerant diversity, fostering a peaceful, dynamic, and vibrant religious atmosphere (Harahap et al., 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The study addressed three main issues: the implementation of the *Toben Lewo* ritual, the meaning of the ritual, and the implications of the ritual in grounding

religious moderation in Indonesia. This ritual guides its practitioners to bring about safety, with a focus on both individual and communal safety in the present and future. The idealism of safety presented in this ritual can be seen as a convergence point with the idealism and aspirations of religious moderation in Indonesia. The Botung community, despite their different religious backgrounds, comes together to achieve collective safety. The distinctive character of the Toben Lewo ritual is reflected in expressions such as good living, safety, brotherhood, and salvation. This study opens up possibilities for exploration from other scholarly perspectives such as culture and literature. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will serve as a starting point for other researchers to further develop it with an integrative-interconnected perspective based on local wisdom.

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