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FROM 'HIT TAHUN' TO 'AL-ALA KIT': IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION  
AMONG THE DAWANESE IN TIMOR

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**Abstract:**

This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the construction of identity among the Dawanese, in Timor, Indonesia. The identity construction here is conceptualised as an on-going process of meaning-making through which individuals and groups define who they are and how they live their lives. This meaning-making process characterises also the life-journey of an individual or a people. This article suggests that the identity of Dawanese is constructed based upon the local binary concept of Kase-Meto. Using such a concept, the Dawanese unavoidably develop a way of seeing oneself through the window of an imagined other. In order to reform or even change the way of identity construction that is very closely attached to the binary concept of Kase-Meto, I argue for radical efforts to weaken the polarisation of Kase-Meto on one hand, and to make use of this concept as an opportunity for positive developments, on the other hand, through the development of a more effective educational system.

**Key Words** — *identity, identity construction, Dawanese, Kase, Meto.*

**1) Introduction**

Social theorists have written much about the notion of identity construction. This topic becomes urgent when a society becomes increasingly multicultural. According to Jonathan Sacks, "One of the great transformations from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries is that whereas the former was dominated by the politics of *ideology*, we are now entering an age of the politics of *identity*" (Sacks 2002:10). While people in modern multicultural societies would consider the question of identity as part of how they define and redefine their existence and coexistence, the same task of constructing an identity is faced by everybody, including those who live in a monocultural society. The reason is that identity is part of everybody's biographical uniqueness.

This article deals with the question of how the Dawanese<sup>1</sup> in Timor construct their identity. The Dawanese is the biggest ethnic group living in West Timor (part of Indonesia) and Oecusse (part of East Timor).

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<sup>1</sup> The term Dawanese is used in this article in both singular and plural forms.

Besides the term 'Dawanese', in most of the anthropological and ethnological writing, this ethnic group is also called 'Atoni' or 'Atoin Pah Meto' (Cunningham 1964; Schulte Nordholt 1971). In the modern Dawanese society, however, the term Dawanese is more popular in daily use compared to that of Atoni or Atoin Pah Meto. Even though the terms 'Atoni' and 'Atoin Pah Meto' are broadly used in academic writings, in this article I choose to use the term Dawanese by reason of its popular use.

As a Dawanese myself, I have been long tempted to address the question of the Dawanese identity construction. While acknowledging a need for more empirical research on the topic, this piece of work is purely a preliminary attempt and note to understand the subject of enquiry based upon my shared experiences as a Dawanese with other Dawanese people.<sup>2</sup> The type of Dawanese society itself still needs to be assessed. However, I simply generalise the Dawanese society as a monocultural society in this article. Cunningham (1964:35), for instance, argues that "Atoni share many elements of a common culture, though there are variations over the ten princedoms" in Timor. This article begins with a theoretical consideration of the notion of identity before a closer look at the Dawanese construction of identity is presented.

## 2) Forms of Identity Construction

Identity is a fundamental concept and a key theme in sociological studies. Manuel Castells, one of the contemporary leading sociologists argues that identity is people's source of meaning and experience (Castells 1997:6). Since identity relates to meaning and experience, its construction determines the way people think about 'who they are', 'where they are coming from', 'how they should live and try to live their lives according to the answers they find most plausible' (Berger 1981; Ackerman 1989:5; Giddens 1991; Taylor 1994:33). What precisely is self-identity? According to Giddens, "It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (Giddens 1991:52-53). Identity is therefore an on-going process of construction of the self (Tietze and Musson 2002:318) based on individual and collective, culturally mediated interpretations of various events that people go through in life. This on-going process is also a meaning-making process where individuals and groups define who they are. From the sociological perspective, the above argument supports the idea that all identities are constructed (Shotter and Gergen 1989; Castells 1997). Although identity is constructed, Giddens suggests that the 'identity' of the self presumes reflexive awareness since it is not something that is just given, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in reflexive activities (Giddens 1991:52). Identity is therefore constructed in an on-going reflexive individual and collective activity. There is a difference, however, between self identity and collective identity (Appiah 1994:150-151). Self-identity deals with the biographical formation of a person which consists of important social and moral features such as intelligence, charm, wit and cupidity. Collective social identity includes religion, gender, ethnicity, 'race' and sexuality. Though they are different, they are inseparable because both deal with properties that are more or less equally important to social life.

The process of answering the basic and fundamental questions regarding identity is a process of defining and redefining both individual and collective identity. This process is possible through the dialogical encounter with others. In other words, identity construction always takes place in a context of relationship, dialogue and exchanges with others. For Charles Taylor, open dialogue and relationships are the key loci and a tool of self-discovery and self-affirmation in the culture of authenticity (Taylor 1994:36). This is to

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<sup>2</sup> Since it is a preliminary attempt to understand the identity construction among the Dawanese, I am fully responsible for all the representations of the Dawanese here. These representations in my view capture the Dawanese society in general, though special studies of various areas within the Dawanese society may indicate otherwise. To my knowledge, there is no major academic work on the subject yet.

say that dialogue is the precondition of identity construction. Following Descartes' dictum, one would say, "I dialogue, therefore I am". When the status of dialogue in public life is considered, Ackerman even goes on to suggest that dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship. "Although a morally reflective person *can* permissibly cut herself off from real-world dialogue, a responsible citizen *cannot* with similar propriety cut herself off from political dialogue" (Ackerman 1989:6). Dialogue is therefore central to identity construction and the politics of public life. In other words, dialogue is a social action by which social actors establish bonds with one another (Gurevitch 1990:182). Moreover, the nature of dialogue bears also within it the seeds of hope since it insures that 'no man is an island' and human existence is not a lonely event but part of a larger whole of coexistence (Holquist 1990:38).

The relationship between identity construction and dialogical exchange with others is not unproblematic. Often this relationship is challenged by the issue of who constructs the individual and collective identity and for whom this identity is constructed. Adopting the critical approaches of critical theorists and feminists, one may argue that self-identity is constructed by the society to serve its interests. In my opinion, this criticism neglects the relational aspects and therefore isolates the dynamic relationship between an individual or group and society. The idea of dialogue accommodates this dynamic relationship. Through dialogue, identity is negotiated and the dialogical relations with others provide a context within which identity construction and negotiation takes place. In other words, dialogue defines the dignity of the differences. Rather than seeing the two entities of individual and society as two independent entities, it could be argued that "society constitutes and inhabits the core of whatever passes for personhood: each is interpenetrated by its other" (Sampson 1989:4).

How then is identity constructed? The dialogical nature of identity construction as I have mentioned basically shapes the forms of identity building. In his book, *The Power of Identity* first published in 1997, Manuel Castells proposes a distinction between three forms and origins of identity-building, namely, legitimising identity, resistance identity and project identity. I will briefly discuss these three forms of identity building based upon the interpretation of Castells. The first form of identity-building is legitimising identity. In the legitimising identity, an identity is introduced, created and constructed by the dominant organisations, institutions, political parties or unions. This model of identity construction allows such organisations to exercise their power, to extend their knowledge and to rationalise their domination over individuals. In this form of identity construction, dominant institutions determine both individual and collective identity. This model of identity-building tends to be repressive and oppressive.

The second one is resistance identity. This form of identity building is different from legitimising identity. This identity construction is generated by actors who live the spirit of refusal towards the dominating power of organisations. Here identity is built upon a project of resistance that opposes the rationalisation of certain institutional dominations. This opposition stand is normally developed based upon basic principles that are different from the principles of the oppressive institutions. This form of identity building therefore tends to be a defensive identity. The third type of identity-building is project identity. If both legitimising and resistance identities produce objects, project identity produces subjects. In this project identity, social actors construct an identity that defines and redefines their positions in the society through which they reach holistic meaning of their life experiences. Project identity is a creative project that is probably based on an oppressed identity or resistance identity but is always directed towards the transformation of society.

The above three forms of identity-building appear in most societies. Again, all these forms of identity-building are made possible by the dialogical character of the notion of identity construction. This dialogical character may appear in different forms such as acceptance, recognition, adjustment, adaptation,

refusal, resistance and confrontation. The point is that identity-building is made possible in the encounter with others. Having these three forms in mind and the dialogical character of identity building, I will now proceed in representing a binary concept of *Kase-Meto*, which in my opinion controls identity formation among the Dawanese.

### 3) The Dawanese Binary Concept of *Kase-Meto*

In the very heart of every Dawanese, there is a deep imagination and self-concept based upon the polarisation of two local terms: *Kase-Meto*.<sup>3</sup> It is not easy to find English words to translate these two words. However, a better understanding can be obtained by explaining the two words in practical terms. The word *Kase* is usually used for foreigners, strangers, people who are well-educated, people with power and those with access to a richer or better life. Conceptually, *Kase* is an outsider but at the same time *Kase* implies a dominant power over *Meto*. *Kase* also represents good-looking, smart and stylish people (Cunningham 1964:66).<sup>4</sup> A *Kase* is identified with big houses, office work and good food on the table. Because of this, *Kase* has special privileges. In the modern Dawanese society, *Kase* is normally called 'Pak' or 'Ibu' -Indonesian words for 'Sir' and 'Madam'. The closest example of *Kase* would be the 'master' in the famous master-slave allegory by Hegel (1949). Like the 'master' of Hegel, *Kase* is seen as independent due to the power and dominating access over resources needed for a better life. In the Dawanese imagination, *Kase* has everything that relates to a good and joyful life. *Kase's* life is heaven for the Dawanese.

How about *Meto*? The Dawanese name themselves *Meto*. In assuming this name, they separate themselves from the world of *Kase*. This separation characterises as well their differences, points of view and styles of life. I said that they name themselves, because that is how they see themselves. *Meto* have characteristics that are basically opposite to those of *Kase*. In the Dawanese imagination, a *Meto* is usually recognised in what he/she wears, where he/she lives, what he/she eats and what he/she does. A *Meto* wears *beti* or *tais* which are names for local attire, stays in a grass-roofed house, works in traditional farms or fields. He/she must be dirty due to his/her attachment to farms or fields. A *Meto* has no right to complain and therefore also has no right to say 'no'. Again in the Dawanese imagination, a *Meto* has to be honest, obedient in all things, bows when he/she meets a *Kase* and eats only corn or cassava. A *Meto* will always say 'yes' to *Kase* in whatever condition. It is forbidden to voice a loud 'No' when dealing with *Kase*. Since Dawanese identify *Meto* with their farms or fields, a *Meto* therefore can only work in a farm or a field with traditional farming strategies rooted in the local belief system including the strategy of coping and anticipating climate change (Kieft 2001). A *Meto* cannot work in an office. This way of attaching a *Meto* to farms or fields has profound consequences in which being a farmer in the Dawanese society is not seen as a job: being a farmer is simply accepted as *the way* a *Meto* should be. The *Meto*-ness is defined by a life attached to the dirty soil of farms or fields which symbolise as well difficulties, problems, hard work and routines. The closest idea of *Meto* would be the idea of slave in the Hegelian allegory of master-slave. Unlike *Kase* who is powerful, a *Meto* is powerless. In fact *Meto* have power as well. However, this power can only be exercised among the *Meto* community. Power becomes powerless when a *Meto* faces outsiders or *Kase*.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this article, I use the terms *Kase* and *Meto* both interchangeably in singular and plural. Therefore, sometimes I employ singular terms such 'a *Kase*' or 'a *Meto*' and sometimes I simply use '*Kase*' and '*Meto*'. While a particular style is not employed in this way of using the terms, I use the terms just to make and stress my ways of representing the Dawanese.

<sup>4</sup> Handsomeness belongs to *Kase*. See for example the tale of the ritual lord of Insana described by Cunningham (1964:66). "The ritual lord came alone to Maubesi and was impressed by the fine coconut and areca palms already planted there. He had a very handsome face; but when he came, his face and the rest of his body were blackened with charcoal. He visited a spring and saw a child of the ruling line, Afeanpah, fetching water. He asked for a drink, but the child would not give the ruler's water to such an ugly man. Taking a leaf, he washed away the charcoal, revealing his handsomeness. The child then ran home telling what had happened and describing the handsome face; he said that the man was the true *ane-pena tuan* (paddy-corn master). When the people heard this, they came to see the man and acknowledged him as their ritual lord. He then established himself with his secular lords at Maubesi".

Therefore, a *Meto* cannot be called 'Pak' or 'Ibu'. A *Meto* can only be called 'naef' or 'oen' (local way of saying Mr or Mrs).

In the allegory of master-slave by Hegel, the relationship between the two is determined by conflict and therefore there is always a dialectical relationship. Even though the polarisation of *Kase-Meto* is quite close to that of the Hegelian master-slave allegory as I have mentioned, the relation of *Kase-Meto* is not determined by conflict. *Meto* has never been in a conflict with *Kase*. *Meto* simply takes for granted that *Kase* is in a better position than his or her own. A *Meto* does not and cannot complain about the privileges enjoyed by *Kase*. Those privileges are considered as normal. Moreover, the power enjoyed by *Kase* is seen as the way things should be. The Dawanese have a history of conflicts as well but these conflicts are not conflicts with *Kase*. In the olden days, *Meto* recognised conflict only when there were civil wars within a principedom which was called *mus ain* or tame enemy and wars with another principedom called *mus fui* or wild enemy (Cunningham 1964:64; Schulte Nordholt 1971; Nenonabu 2006). The Dawanese only have conflicts with their enemies. There is no conflict with *Kase* because *Kase* is not an enemy. *Kase* is the master and lord.

The characterisation of *Kase* among the Dawanese who name themselves *Meto* influences daily interaction. *Kase* are seen as first class people and *Meto* are always second class. In any meeting, gathering or party, an 'unwritten segregation rule' is understood by all in which *Kase* have and should have front seats while *Meto* have and should have back seats. When a meal is served, *Kase* have the privilege of tasting first. *Meto* would have their turn later. A *Meto* knows that that is the way things should be organised. Therefore, one of the most famous phrases used by the Dawanese is '*hit tahun*'<sup>5</sup> which means, 'please go first' or 'you may go first, please!' The first place is always for *Kase*. A *Meto* has his/her place after a *Kase* has his/hers. Generally, the Dawanese 'believe' that in using that phrase, they exercise and display the Dawanese kindness and humility, just like the moral conclusion hidden in the myths and fables in Timor (Middlekoop 1959). However, this kindness and humility arguably have their source in the binary concept of *Kase-Meto*. The phrase I have just mentioned is even used in a conflict that involves a physical fight. When there is a conflict involving a physical fight, without any doubt, a *Meto* would simply and humbly tell his/her opponent: '*ho mtao muhun*' which means 'you may fight me first'. A *Meto* cannot and will never be the first to initiate a fight or conflict. A *Meto* always has to wait for a situation to respond. A *Meto* can only be responsive. He/she cannot and will never be active.

While the term *Kase* addresses outsiders, it seems this term also captures the imagination of the Dawanese about a good and joyful life somewhere. In other words, *Kase* is not a fact, *Kase* is only the Dawanese imagination. Up to the 1960s, the only buildings which were not grass-roofed and were of substantial size were churches. The presence of the church buildings was welcomed as an answer to the desire of the Dawanese to become *Kase*. Christianity did not really struggle to be welcomed in the Dawanese society. Using the *Kase-Meto* way of thinking, it could be argued that Christianity represents the imagination of *Kase* and for the Dawanese, being Christian means being initiated to a new life of being *Kase*. With such initiation, at least one can imagine himself/herself living as a *Kase* in an ungrass-roofed and big house called a church. Moreover, the introduction of soteriological terms such as heaven and hell precisely fits the Dawanese imagination of *Kase-Meto* in which *Kase* represents heaven and *Meto* represents hell.

In saying *Kase*, a Dawanese who is a *Meto* imagines a life outside his/her tribe, that is, a better life with easy power and access to all resources and possibilities. This becomes clear in the way parents normally advise their children. A Dawanese parent who is a *Meto* normally advises his/her sons and/or daughters to

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase '*hit tahun*' is a plural phrase. In singular form, the phrase becomes '*ho muhun*' which means, 'you may go first please'.

go to school or to work hard so that they can be *Kase* or at least leave the dirty soil of farm or field to work in offices or any other type of job, as long as it is not farming. A Dawanese parent dreams of his/her children becoming *Kase* in the future. Down deep in the heart of the Dawanese parent, there is always a dream that one day in the future, his/her children who are *Meto* may go through a metamorphosis by studying or working hard in order to become *Kase*. The world of *Kase* in the Dawanese imagination is always a happy land somewhere which is not in the dirty soil of traditional farms or fields. Farms and fields seem to be a curse for the Dawanese because it is where they define or even name themselves.

#### 4) Seeing Oneself through the Window of an Imagined Other

I mentioned earlier that dialogue is the precondition of identity construction. Indeed, the Dawanese construction of identity is also made possible through the power of dialogue. It is quite clear that the Dawanese construct their identity in the dialogue with *Kase*. However, *Kase*, in my opinion, is not a concept of real people. I would argue that *Kase* is an 'imagined other' created by *Meto* to represent something better than himself/herself or simply to represent a better life with rich resources and possibilities. Why is *Kase* an 'imagined other' created by the *Meto*? *Kase* is an imagined other because through the notion of *Kase*, a *Meto* imagines a better life and possibilities to overcome or even escape from the prison and destiny of being *Meto*. This model of 'imagined other' more or less follows the kind of 'imagined communities' proposed by Benedict Anderson when he discusses the notion of nationalism (2006). Through the creation of *Kase* as the *Meto*'s imagined other, *Meto* or the Dawanese construct his/her identity. Or to put it precisely, for the Dawanese, *Kase* is an instrument of identity construction that allows *Meto* to imagine a heavenly life on one hand and enables *Kase*, at least as a concept, to maintain a dominating power over *Meto*. Interestingly, I would argue, unlike other concepts such as master-slave or West-Orient, *Kase-Meto* is not about two competing forces. There is no conflict between the two forces. When a *Meto* goes through a sort of metamorphosis to be 'a new being' as *Kase*, this *Meto* does not put him/herself through the risk of leaving *Meto* in order to be transformed into a new *Kase*.

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois develops a reflection about the strange meaning of being black in American Society (1903; rep.1999). In this work, Du Bois introduces a very interesting account called 'double consciousness' experienced by the African-American in the USA. This is what Du Bois says: "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is sort of seventh son born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields to him no true self consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (1999:10-11). Dawanese see themselves as *Meto* through the idea of *Kase*, just as African-Americans see themselves, as pointed out by Du Bois. The Dawanese also measure their lives, their dreams based on an imagined standard of *Kase* lifestyle. Though the characterisation of the Dawanese consciousness is different from that of the African-Americans, the Dawanese, who are *Meto*, also live a double consciousness. On one hand they see themselves as *Meto* and therefore accept the fundamental meaning of being *Meto*. On the other hand, this way of being *Meto* is always seen through the window of their 'imagined other' named *Kase*. This Dawanese model of double consciousness is a consciousness of being imprisoned in the curse of destiny but still with the hope or even the dream to escape from this destiny to a promised land of transformational *Kase*. In other words, *Meto* is *Meto* but the *Meto*-ness can only be understood when a *Meto* sees, defines and redefines himself/herself through the world of *Kase*.

When this consciousness is considered in the identity construction of the Dawanese, to employ Castells' distinction for forms of identity-building, I would argue that the Dawanese mostly exercise the legitimising identity and resistance identity. However, the interpretation of these two forms of identity-building in the context of the Dawanese society is different from the interpretation of Castells. In legitimising identity, *Kase* plays a dominant role and holds power over *Meto*. The difference is that this dominating power is not rationalised and maintained by *Kase*. What happens is that the power of *Kase* is offered by *Meto* through their imagination about *Kase*. The authority of *Kase* does not belong to *Kase*. Instead it is a gift given from the *Meto*. Since it is a gift, the power of *Kase* is unquestionable. The same thing happens in the resistance identity. The interesting thing is that this resistance identity of the Dawanese is not formed by a resistance to external domination. Instead it is a resistance to his/her own creation or understanding about his/her *Meto*-ness. This claim is supported by the Dawanese dreams of being *Kase* and the portrayal of how a *Meto* sees himself/herself. In other words, the logic of domination works also in the resistance identity of the Dawanese. However, the existence of the Dawanese is not dominated by external power. Instead, he himself or she herself dominates himself/herself through his/her own imagination of another world called a world of *Kase*.

### 5) Towards a Project Identity: Conclusion

Today, the Dawanese have to face big problems such as malnutrition, a poor health care system, poor sanitation, lack of education and massive poverty. Daily existence seems to be a bitter one for individuals, families and society at large. In my opinion, the construction of *Kase-Meto* in the imagination of the Dawanese makes a massive contribution towards such problems. Just as Cornel West (1994) characterises the fundamental crisis faced by the communities of black America, I am convinced that the fundamental crisis of the Dawanese society is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love, which are inseparable. The concept of *Kase-Meto* contributes a lot to this fundamental crisis. As a concept, *Kase-Meto* is a double-sided blade cutting through the systems of life and ways of thinking within the Dawanese communities. To put it bluntly, the Dawanese experience poor health conditions and massive poverty simply because of 'the belief' in their sub-conscious that 'that is the real, true and genuine way a *Meto* should be'. In such belief, power and wealth do not belong to them, they both belong to a certain special world called *Kase*.

As far as the development of the Dawanese cultural, social and economic life is concerned, the Dawanese *Kase-Meto* way of looking at oneself is very dangerous. This view certainly closes the door to initiatives, reasonable ambitions and plans. Moreover, this view opts for and advocates a static society rather than a progressive society. A strategic plan to develop the lives of the Dawanese socially, economically and politically, cannot simply turn a blind eye to the danger of having *Kase-Meto* as a basic psychosocial template in constructing one's identity. Indeed, a more detailed study on the genealogy of the *Kase-Meto* concept certainly needs to be carried out. In order to reform or even change the way of identity construction that is very closely attached to the binary concept of *Kase-Meto*, I would argue for radical efforts to weaken the polarisation of *Kase-Meto* on one hand, and to make use of this concept as an opportunity for positive developments, on the other hand. This can only happen if the Dawanese move towards a development of what Castells calls project identity. In this project identity, every Dawanese should be a social actor. Here building identity should become a project for 'a different life' that is not based upon the dream of being transformed to be *Kase* but upon the individual and collective consciousness to develop the Dawanese life as seen, for instance, in the idea of '*ta'fena hit kuan ma hit pah*' which means 'let's build and develop our beloved village and country'. I am not suggesting that the Dawanese should leave their '*Meto*-ness' and wear the new clothes of '*Kase*-ness'. Following Castells, my suggestion is that this project identity should expand towards a productive transformation of the Dawanese society, not based upon the polarisation of *Kase-Meto* or the imagined *Kase*, but based upon the will of

liberating oneself from his/her own created and imagined oppression (or even oppressor). At this point, I consider education as the most effective way to tackle such polarisation, though more practical suggestions and plans for educational development should be clearly laid out. It is only through a project identity, '*hit tahun*' which means 'you may go first' could be transformed to '*al-ala kit*' which means 'let's move together' without being driven by the *Kase-Meto* style of thinking. \*\*\*\*\*

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