



The Rationality of Parmalim Teachings and Practices Local Religion Amid the Dominance of Religions

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Abstract

Local religions in Indonesia are often marginalized and deemed irrational because they are evaluated using the parameters of dominant world religions. One such local religion is Parmalim, the belief system of the Toba Batak people, which is frequently reduced to a pre-modern tradition or even considered deviant. This article aims to analyze the rationality of Parmalim's teachings and practices as a local religion amidst the dominance of world religions and the tide of modernity. This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method, analyzed through the framework of the phenomenology of religion and the concept of local wisdom. The findings of this study indicate that Parmalim possesses a coherent internal religious rationality, reflected in the concept of the deity Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, its religious ritual structure, its code of conduct, and the cosmological relationship between humans, nature, and God. This rationality is symbolic, practical, and contextual, serving to maintain the moral and social order of its community of adherents. Furthermore, Parmalim's capacity for social adaptation amidst modernity and religious pluralism demonstrates a reflective and strategic social rationality. This article concludes that Parmalim is not merely a cultural heritage but a rational, meaningful, and relevant religious system, and thus should be understood as a legitimate part of the plurality of ways in which people experience the sacred within the context of Indonesia's diverse society.

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INTRODUCTION

Religious and belief system diversity is one of the fundamental characteristics of Indonesian society. In addition to the six religions officially recognized by the state, there are various local religions and beliefs that have emerged from the traditions, cosmologies, and spiritual experiences of indigenous communities. However, in social practice and academic discourse, local religions are often placed in a marginal position, both theologically and sociologically. They are frequently viewed as belief systems that are not yet "perfect," irrational in nature, or merely remnants of pre-modern traditions destined to be subordinated within the currents of world religions and modernity (Ayu & Anwar, 2024).

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Parmalim, a belief system that developed among the Toba Batak people in North Sumatra, is one of the local religions facing this situation. Parmalim is rooted in the belief in Debata Mulajadi Nabolon as the One True God and emphasizes a holy life, moral obedience, and balance between humans, nature, and the Creator. Although it possesses a relatively systematic structure of teachings, rituals, and ethics, Parmalim is often reductively perceived as a “traditional belief” or even a “heretical sect,” particularly in relation to dominant religions (Fienda et al., 2026).

One of the fundamental issues that frequently arises in the study of local religions is the use of conceptual frameworks from world religions that are ill-suited to capturing the complexity of local communities’ religious experiences. In response to this issue, Ma’arif emphasizes the importance of employing methodological approaches that are more contextual and sensitive to the experiences of research subjects. He proposes three main approaches in the study of local religions: the cross-cultural, humanistic, and interdisciplinary approaches. The cross-cultural approach positions research as a space for dialogue between the researcher’s culture and the culture of the community being studied, so that religious meaning is understood through the interaction of two distinct cultural horizons. The humanistic approach views religion as an expression of human creativity and a way of thinking in response to the realities of life. Meanwhile, the interdisciplinary approach allows for a more comprehensive study of local religion by incorporating various academic perspectives, such as the phenomenology of religion, the anthropology of religion, and other social science disciplines (Rahman et al., 2021).

In many previous studies, Parmalim has generally been discussed from historical or cultural anthropological perspectives, or as part of the dynamics of local religions in Indonesia. These studies have made important contributions to describing the origins, rituals, and social challenges faced by the Parmalim community. However, there is still relatively little research that seriously positions Parmalim as a religious system possessing internal rationality, both theologically and socially. Consequently, local religions are often evaluated using the parameters of the rationality of world religions, thereby overlooking the symbolic and cultural logic inherent within them (Wahyudi, 2021).

In fact, upon closer examination, the teachings and practices of Parmalim reveal a coherent and rational system of meaning within the framework of the religious experience of the Toba Batak people. This rationality does not always manifest in the form of written doctrine or speculative theology, but rather is embodied through rituals, symbols, ethical principles, and cosmological relationships that govern human interactions with God, nature, and fellow human beings. In this context, religious rationality cannot be narrowly understood as scientific rationality or formal logic, but rather as a religious rationality that serves to maintain the moral and social order of its adherents’ community (Harjana & Amri, 2025).

Furthermore, amidst modernity and religious pluralism, Parmalim does not completely isolate itself or adopt an antagonistic stance toward change. On the contrary, the Parmalim community demonstrates a capacity for social adaptation without losing its religious identity. This indicates that the rationality of Parmalim’s teachings also serves as a survival strategy in the face of external pressures, whether from the state, dominant religions, or socio-cultural changes (Sudarsono, 2026).

Against this backdrop, this article seeks to analyze how the rationalization of Parmalim teachings and practices can be understood as a form of local religion possessing its own religious logic amidst the dominance of world religions and modernity. Using a phenomenological approach to religion and a perspective of local wisdom, this article aims to demonstrate that Parmalim is not merely a cultural

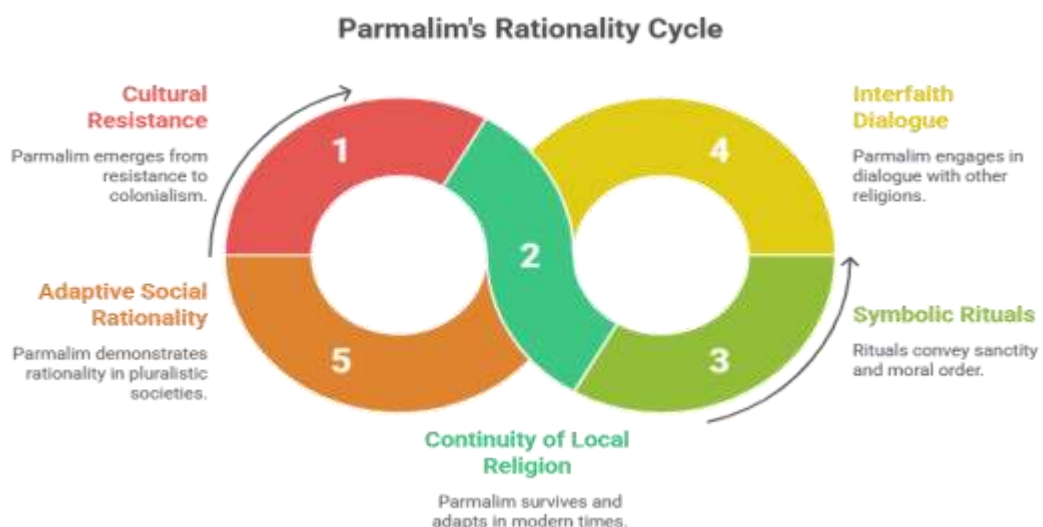
heritage but a rational, meaningful, and relevant belief system within the context of Indonesia's pluralistic society. This study is expected to contribute to the development of local religion studies while expanding understanding of the plurality of rationalities in religious life (Amrullah, 2022).

Studies of local religions, including Parmalim, require a theoretical framework capable of understanding religion as a lived experience (lived religion), not merely as a formal doctrinal system. Therefore, this article employs a religious phenomenological approach as the primary foundation for analyzing the rationality of Parmalim's teachings and practices. The phenomenological approach to religion emphasizes the importance of understanding religion from the perspective of its adherents themselves, by suspending external normative and theological judgments (Nurcholis, 2021).

In the tradition of the phenomenology of religion, as articulated by Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart, religion is understood as a symbolic system that gives meaning to reality, sacred experience, and the orientation of human life. Religious rationality, in this context, is not measured by logical or scientific criteria of right and wrong, but rather by its ability to establish a meaningful order, ethics, and social relations for its community of adherents. Thus, rituals, myths, and religious symbols are not viewed as forms of irrationality, but as rational expressions of religious experience that is inherently contextual (Arrasy, 2022).

This approach is relevant for understanding Parmalim, as many elements of its teachings are expressed through symbols, rituals, and collective practices. Belief in Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, for example, is not systematized in written theology, but manifests in the form of a code of conduct, rites of sanctity, and cosmological relationships that unite God, humanity, and nature. From a phenomenological perspective, this actually demonstrates a distinctive form of religious rationality rooted in the cultural context of the Batak Toba people.

In addition to the phenomenology of religion, this article also draws on the concept of local religion as local wisdom. Local religion cannot be separated from the cultural, historical, and social contexts of the communities that practice it. Within this framework, local religion is understood as a value system that serves to maintain life's balance, collective identity, and social harmony. The rationality of local religion lies in its ability to address concrete issues facing society, such as social relations, environmental ethics, and communal solidarity:



Previous studies on Parmalim indicate that this religion plays a crucial role in preserving Batak Toba identity amidst colonialism and the penetration of world religions. Katimin (2012) positions Parmalim as a spiritual and social movement born

from a context of cultural resistance against colonial domination and Christian missionary activities. Meanwhile, Situmorang (2017) emphasizes the existence of Parmalim as a form of continuity of local religion capable of surviving in the modern era. These studies provide important historical and sociological insights, yet they have not explicitly examined the dimension of Parmalim's religious rationality. Other studies conducted place greater emphasis on the symbolic and semiotic meanings of Parmalim rituals, such as Marari Sabtu and Sipaha Sada. Their findings indicate that Parmalim rituals are imbued with values of sanctity, moral order, and harmonious relations between humans and God. Nevertheless, these studies remain largely descriptive and have not yet linked these rituals to the broader discourse on religious rationality (Bandur, 2023).

In the context of interfaith relations, Siburian, Hutagalung, and Ferinia (2022) highlight the potential for dialogue between the Parmalim belief system and Christianity. This study is interesting because it shows that Parmalim is not exclusive or anti-dialogue, but rather possesses universal values that enable interfaith communication. These findings reinforce the argument that Parmalim possesses an adaptive social rationality, particularly within pluralistic societies. Based on this literature review, it can be concluded that there remains a gap in research regarding the understanding of Parmalim as an internally rational religious system. This article seeks to fill this gap by combining a phenomenological approach to religion with the concept of local wisdom to interpret Parmalim's teachings and practices as a form of contextual religious rationality. Within this framework, Parmalim is no longer positioned as a "marginal religion," but rather as a legitimate expression of the diversity of ways in which humans understand and experience the sacred.

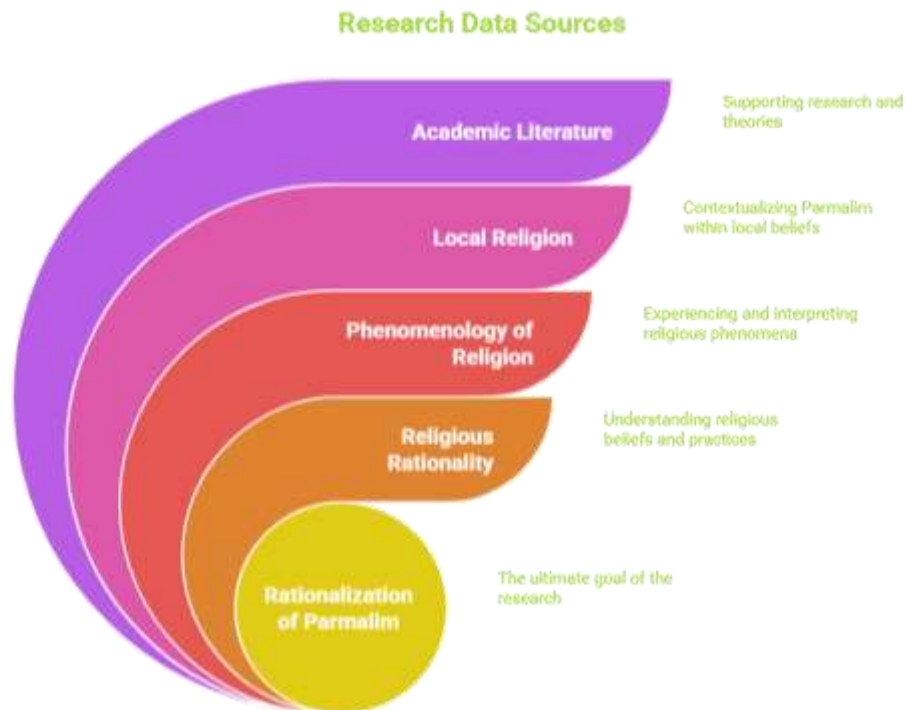
METHODS

This research article employs a qualitative research approach using the library research method. Descriptive research is used to depict or describe existing phenomena, whether natural or human-made (Candra et al., 2025). This study does not seek to identify or explain relationships, nor does it test hypotheses; rather, it merely describes a variable, phenomenon, or condition as it is (Putri et al., 2024). The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this study is not on quantitative measurement, but on understanding the meaning, rationality, and symbolic construction of Parmalim religious teachings and practices. This study seeks to interpret local religion as a system of lived meaning (lived religion) within a specific social and cultural context (Efendi et al., 2023).

The primary approach used is the phenomenology of religion. This approach takes the religious experiences of Parmalim adherents as the starting point for analysis, by setting aside external normative, theological, and ideological judgments. Therefore, understanding religion in a phenomenological study means understanding it through its history, with an emphasis on its religious dimensions. Phenomenology as a method aims to understand religious thought, behavior, and institutions as they are, without resorting to theories from metaphysics, philosophy, theology, or psychology. One way to understand religious phenomenology is to view it as a reaction to historical, sociological, and psychological approaches in the study of religion (Mulyawan et al., 2025). Religious phenomenology allows researchers to understand how Parmalim teachings, rituals, and symbols are internally interpreted by the community of adherents, as well as how these meanings function in shaping their religious and social rationality (Hafizh & Efendi, 2023).

The research data was sourced from relevant literature, including academic books, scientific journal articles, previous research findings, and literature discussing

local religion, Parmalim, the phenomenology of religion, and religious rationality. These sources were selected purposefully, taking into account their relevance to the research focus, namely the rationalization of Parmalim teachings and practices in the context of local religion and modern society (Afrianto, A & Pasaleron, 2024).



Data analysis was conducted using thematic-conceptual analysis. The collected data were classified into main themes, such as concepts of divinity, religious rituals, symbols of sanctity, social ethics, and Parmalim's relationship with modernity and religious pluralism. These themes were then analyzed using a framework of religious phenomenology and the concept of local wisdom to uncover the internal rationality contained within Parmalim teachings and practices. Using this method, this article seeks to produce a deep and critical understanding of Parmalim as a rational and meaningful religious system (Sulastris et al., 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Brief History of the Parmalim Religion

The phenomenological approach is the approach or method most closely related to the historical approach. This is because phenomenology and history complement each other. Phenomenology cannot stand alone without the assistance of ethnology, philology, and other historical disciplines. Conversely, phenomenology assists historical disciplines in interpreting religious meaning. Therefore, understanding religion in phenomenological studies means understanding religion through its history while emphasizing its religious dimensions (Ghazali, 2000). Thus, to interpret the teachings and practices of Parmalim as a form of contextual religious rationality, we must examine the brief history of the Parmalim religion (Togatorop, 2025). The Parmalim religion is one of the traditional belief systems that developed among the Toba Batak people in North Sumatra. This belief emerged in the late 19th century as a religious and social movement that reaffirmed the original Batak values amidst the penetration of Dutch colonialism and the intensified spread of Christianity. Initially, the Parmalim religion was a movement by the Batak people to preserve traditional customs and culture in the face of a new religion brought by the Dutch through imperialism and colonialism (Hirose, 2015). In this context,

Parmalim emerged as an effort to preserve the cultural and spiritual identity of the Batak Toba people, which was beginning to be squeezed by external influences (Arifinsyah & Sofian, 2021).

The central figure in the emergence of the Parmalim religion was Guru Somalaing Pardede, who, according to Parmalim tradition, is understood to have received a revelation from the One True God, Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. Guru Somalaing's teachings were later carried forward and institutionalized by Raja Nasiakbagi, who served as the spiritual leader (Uluan) of the Parmalim community. Through this leadership, Parmalim developed into an organized belief system with a relatively stable religious structure. According to Katimin (2012), the development of the Parmalim religion in Sumatra began around 1885 and has persisted to the present day as a form of spiritual resistance against colonial domination and external cultural pressures. In its early phase, the Parmalim movement served as a medium of symbolic resistance that rejected the cultural and religious subordination of the Batak people. Parmalim teachings emphasize the values of purity, honesty, moral discipline, and harmony between humans, nature, and God as the foundation of religious life.

In subsequent developments, Parmalim has not only survived as a local belief system but has also become a symbol of the preservation of Toba Batak cultural values. To this day, the center of Parmalim's religious activities remains in Huta Tinggi Village, Toba Regency, which serves as both a place of worship and a space for community consolidation. This demonstrates that Parmalim is not merely focused on the spiritual dimension but also possesses strong social and cultural functions. Situmorang asserts that the existence of the Parmalim religion reflects the Batak Toba community's ability to preserve their cultural and spiritual identity amidst the tide of modernization and the dominance of world religions. Although the number of adherents is relatively limited, Parmalim continues to demonstrate strong vitality and the ability to adapt to social change. In fact, as explained by Dwi Wahyuni (2024), the Parmalim community not only survives internally but also plays an active role in modern social life while maintaining an open and harmonious attitude toward other groups (Soehadha, 2021).

The Rationality of the Concept of Divinity in Parmalim Teachings

The concept of divinity serves as the primary foundation of every religious system. In Parmalim teachings, God is understood as Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, the supreme Creator who is the source of life, morality, and cosmic order. This concept is often misunderstood as a form of polytheism or irrational local mythology. However, when analyzed phenomenologically, the concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon reveals a clear and coherent monotheistic structure. The Parmalim religion believes in Debata Mulajadi Nabolon as the One and Only God and the creator of all things, while other entities are understood as created intermediaries under His authority. This concept indicates that Parmalim possesses a rational and hierarchical divine structure, even though it is not expressed within the framework of formal theology like world religions (Santiago & Asnawi, 2024). From a religious phenomenological perspective, the concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon functions as a sacred reality experienced existentially by Parmalim adherents. God is not understood through abstract definitions, but through the experience of a holy life, adherence to the patik, and the cosmological relationship between humans, nature, and Debata. This affirms that Parmalim's religious rationality operates through symbolic experiences and daily religious practices (Manullang et al., 2022).

Debata Mulajadi Nabolon is not merely positioned as a supernatural entity, but as the center of ethical and spiritual orientation for the Parmalim community. He

serves as the source of moral norms, the guarantor of the order of nature, and the foundation of harmonious relations between humans and the environment (Mukminin et al., 2024). The rationality of this concept of divinity lies in its function as a unifying principle of the cosmos, not in the systematization of speculative theology as found in world religions. In this context, the religious rationality of Parmalim cannot be measured by the standards of Western dogmatic or theological rationality. Its rationality is practical and symbolic, namely how this concept of God guides human actions, maintains the sanctity of life, and shapes social ethics. Thus, the concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon is a rational expression of the Batak Toba people's efforts to understand transcendent reality and organize their social life (Kurniawan, 2024).

Rationally, Parmalim teachings aim to uphold the social and spiritual order of Batak society through the internalization of noble values. For example, the concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon can be interpreted as a form of belief in the One Supreme God, which aligns with the principle of the Oneness of God in Pancasila. Similarly, respect for ancestors and nature can be understood as a form of ecological spirituality that is rational and relevant amidst modern moral and environmental crises (Hutahaean & SE, 2021).

The Rationality of Parmalim Rituals and Religious Symbols

Rituals are a central element in Parmalim religious practice. The Marari Sabtu service, as well as the Sipaha Sada and Sipaha Lima ceremonies, are often superficially perceived as symbolic activities lacking a rational basis. However, from a phenomenological perspective on religion, rituals are in fact the primary means of constructing and maintaining religious rationality. The Saturday Marari, as a weekly worship service, serves to affirm the sacred temporal order and the moral commitment of the Parmalim community to God's teachings. As explained by Suharyanto (2019), the Saturday Marari ritual is a form of routine worship that affirms the Parmalim community's loyalty to Debata Mulajadi Nabolon as the source of life. The designation of Saturday as a day of worship indicates the existence of a rational rhythmic structure in organizing the spiritual and social life of the community. This ritual is not only individual in nature but also strengthens communal solidarity and the collective identity of the Parmalim community (Tarigan et al., 2025).

The Sipaha Sada and Sipaha Lima ceremonies serve a rational function as mechanisms for self-purification, moral reflection, and reverence for ancestors. The use of symbols such as white clothing, sacred spaces (Bale Pasogit), and ritual movements reflects a structured symbolic logic. These symbols serve as a medium for internalizing the values of purity, order, and cosmic harmony. In this regard, Parmalim rituals can be understood as a rational system of religious communication within the context of local culture. Wiflihani and Suharyanto (2011) also note that the Sipaha Sada ceremony serves as a symbol of gratitude for God's blessings while also functioning as a means of self-purification. This ceremony also affirms the harmonious relationship between humans, ancestors, and the universe in Parmalim teachings. In every ritual, Parmalim adherents wear white clothing as a symbol of purity and inner peace. These teachings demonstrate that the Parmalim belief system is built on the principle of balance between spirituality, tradition, and nature (Khamim, 2022).

Parmalim Ethical Rationality and Cosmological Relations

Parmalim ethical rationality is not constructed through a formal theological system, but rather through ways of life rooted in customs and religious rituals. An ethical way of life that emphasizes purity, honesty, and social harmony indicates the

existence of a normative system that consistently governs the behavior of adherents (Maksum & Kholish, 2025). Demonstrate that Parmalim teachings shape a disciplined and moral way of life through ritual obligations and adherence to Batak Toba customs. In a cosmological context, belief in Debata Mulajadi Nabolon serves as the center of moral and cosmic orientation, connecting humans with nature and the social order. Thus, Parmalim rationality is practical and functional, as it operates directly within the daily lives of its adherents (Siregar & Gulo, 2020). Parmalim teachings reject the excessive exploitation of nature and emphasize respect for the environment as part of a sacred cosmic order. As Mr. D Sinambela stated in an interview with the researcher, he noted that the way of life of Parmalim adherents is deeply connected to nature. Furthermore, the rituals and ceremonies performed by Parmalim are strongly rooted in Batak Toba customs and culture. In the context of the global ecological crisis, this ethical framework demonstrates particularly high rational relevance (Farid & Sos, 2021).

The veneration of ancestors in Parmalim is not irrational or a form of personality cult. Rather, it serves as a moral mechanism to preserve the continuity of collective values and cultural identity. Ancestors are regarded as ethical role models, not objects of worship. Thus, Parmalim's cosmological framework forms a moral rationality rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of the Batak Toba people. Parmalim's ethics, which emphasize honesty, simplicity, and social responsibility, demonstrate that this local religion serves a clear regulatory function in community life. Its rationality lies in its ability to foster social and moral order without relying on legal systems or formal state institutions (Setiawan & Daely, 2024).

The Rationality of Parmalim Teachings and Practices in the Context of Local Religion and Culture

Parmalim teachings and practices can be understood through the lens of religious phenomenology and local cultural approaches. From a phenomenological perspective, every religious teaching possesses its own unique values and meanings that must be understood from the perspective of its adherents, rather than by the standards of other religions. In this regard, Parmalim teachings contain universal values such as honesty, purity, obedience to God, and harmony with nature values also found in the world's major religions (Bandur, 2025). Quoting Siburian, Hutagalung, and Ferinia (2022), Parmalim teachings can be rationally understood as an effort to preserve religious values within the Batak Toba cultural context. Belief in Mulajadi Nabolon does not reject the existence of other religions but rather affirms the distinctive spiritual identity of the Batak people. They also highlight the existence of a bridge of dialogue between Parmalim and Christian teachings, which demonstrates the potential for interfaith tolerance and understanding. Thus, the rationalization of Parmalim teachings is evident in their ability to balance traditional and religious values and to remain open to social interaction across faiths (Ningrum et al., 2026).

Rationally speaking, Parmalim teachings seek to preserve the social and spiritual order of Batak society through the internalization of noble values. For example, the concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon can be interpreted as a form of belief in the One Supreme God, which aligns with the principle of the Oneness of God in Pancasila. Likewise, respect for ancestors and nature can be understood as a form of ecological spirituality that is rational and relevant amidst modern moral and environmental crises. Thus, Parmalim can be regarded as a form of local wisdom that embodies high moral and spiritual rationality. Its teachings demonstrate that local

beliefs are not a form of irrationality, but rather a religious expression that upholds humanity, ethics, and the balance of life (Ramadhan, 2025).

The Rationalization of Parmalim as a Survival Strategy Amid Modernity and Pluralism

Amid the dominance of world religions and the tide of modernity, Parmalim faces significant structural and symbolic pressures. Stigmatization as an “unofficial” or “irrational” religion is a challenge it continues to face. In an increasingly pluralistic and global modern society, Parmalim confronts various dynamics and challenges. One of its main challenges is social stigma and religious discrimination from some members of the outside community who still view Parmalim as “idol worshippers” or even a “heretical sect” (Hakim, 2024). However, the survival of Parmalim to this day demonstrates the existence of a rational strategy for maintaining its existence.

Situmorang (2017) explains that the existence of the Parmalim religion demonstrates the ability of the Toba Batak people to preserve their cultural and spiritual identity amidst the tide of modernization and the spread of world religions. Although the number of its followers is small, the existence of Parmalim shows that local religions in Indonesia still possess strong vitality and are capable of adapting to modern social conditions. The Parmalim community does not choose the path of confrontation, but rather selective social adaptation. They continue to uphold the core teachings and rituals, while building harmonious relationships with the surrounding community and other religious groups. This attitude reflects a pragmatic social rationality the ability to navigate social contexts without losing one’s religious identity (Prakoso, 2022).

In the context of the 4.0 era, which prioritizes technology and knowledge and where popular culture has become highly sought after, there remains a community that upholds its traditional customs and culture: the Parmalim. This community uses tradition and culture as the foundation for forming a belief system. Customs and culture refer to intellectual and spiritual development, as well as aesthetic sensitivity (the way of assessing and expressing beauty) in individuals, groups, or society (Sutrisno, 2005). In the context of modernity and globalization, there are still religions that thrive within traditional customs and culture, even integrating religion and culture into their beliefs and convictions. One such religion that remains alive within the framework of traditional customs and culture is the Malim religion, often referred to as Parmalim.

From the very beginning of the Parmalim religion’s development in Sumatra, it served as a form of resistance against colonialism to preserve authentic Batak traditions. According to Katimin (2012), the development of the Parmalim religion in Sumatra began in 1885 and has persisted to this day as a form of resistance against colonial influence and an effort to preserve authentic Batak traditions. The Parmalim movement initially served as a form of spiritual resistance against colonial domination and external cultural pressures that threatened Batak identity. In modern times, the Parmalim religion has also become a strategy for survival amid modernity and pluralism for some members of the Toba Batak community. Furthermore, the state’s recognition of indigenous faiths following the Constitutional Court’s ruling has been strategically utilized by the Parmalim community to advocate for their civil rights. In the context of religious pluralism, Parmalim demonstrates that local religions are not a threat to social cohesion, but rather a source of ethical values that support tolerance and peace. As explained by Dwi Wahyuni (2024), followers of the Parmalim religion not only survive but also play an active social role within modern society, while maintaining harmony and openness toward other groups (Latief & Syamil, 2024).

The Religious Rationalization of Parmalim from a Phenomenological Perspective

This article begins with the question of how Parmalim teachings and practices can be rationalized as a form of local religion amidst the dominance of world religions and modernity. Based on a phenomenological analysis of the concept of divinity, religious rituals, life ethics, and the social adaptation strategies of the Parmalim community, it can be concluded that Parmalim is a religious system possessing a coherent and meaningful internal rationality. Parmalim's rationality does not lie in a written theological system or formal dogma, but rather in its ability to establish moral, social, and cosmological order for its adherents (Hidayat, 2026). The concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon serves as the center of ethical and spiritual orientation, while religious rituals and symbols function as a medium for the internalization of the values of sanctity, solidarity, and harmony. Parmalim's ethics of life, which emphasize balance between humanity, nature, and God, demonstrate strong rational relevance, particularly in the context of the moral and ecological crises facing modern society (Nasr, 2025).

Furthermore, the survival of Parmalim amidst the pressures of modernity and religious pluralism demonstrates the existence of an adaptive social rationality. The Parmalim community has been able to negotiate its religious identity without losing the core of its teachings, while also building relatively harmonious social relationships with other groups. This underscores that local religions are not merely residual forms of tradition destined to disappear, but rather dynamic and reflective religious expressions. Theoretically, this article contributes to the development of local religion studies by offering an alternative interpretation of the concept of religious rationality. Rationality is no longer understood as singular and hierarchical, but as a plural concept that manifests in various forms according to the cultural context and religious experiences of the community. Practically, this study is expected to foster a more inclusive attitude toward local religions, whether in academic, social, or public policy spheres. Thus, understanding Parmalim as a rational religious system means not only acknowledging its existence but also valuing the diversity of ways in which people interpret the sacred. This recognition is a crucial step toward building a just, tolerant, and civilized religious life within Indonesia's pluralistic society (Farasi et al., 2023).

An analysis of Parmalim teachings and practices reveals that religious rationality cannot be understood solely through the framework of formal doctrinal or theological rationality, as is commonly employed in the study of world religions. The findings in this article demonstrate that Parmalim possesses a religious rationality that is symbolic, practical, and contextual, rooted in the historical and cultural experiences of the Batak Toba people. This rationality operates through a system of meaning internalized within rituals, ethical practices, and cosmological relationships, rather than through written dogma or speculative theological systems. From a phenomenological perspective on religion, this aligns with the view that religion must be understood through how its adherents experience and interpret the sacred. The concept of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, for example, is not formulated in abstract theological terminology but functions concretely as the center of moral and cosmological orientation. This function demonstrates that Parmalim religious rationality is functional and normative, that is, it regulates human behavior and maintains social order. Thus, the claim that local religions are irrational becomes problematic because it ignores the internal logic at work within them (TONO, 2025).

This finding also reinforces criticism of the academic and social tendency to evaluate local religions using the standards of dominant religions. Such an approach

tends to portray local religions as “underdeveloped” or “imperfect,” even though differences in forms of religious expression are not synonymous with differences in levels of rationality. Parmalim, in fact, demonstrates that religious rationality can manifest in non-dogmatic, embodied forms, and be deeply rooted in the community’s daily practices. This discussion also reveals that Parmalim’s rationality does not stop at the spiritual dimension but also functions as a survival strategy amidst modernity and religious pluralism. The selective adaptation undertaken by the Parmalim community preserving the core teachings while opening space for social dialogue demonstrates a reflective form of social rationality. This stance allows Parmalim to remain viable without having to assimilate or negate its religious identity (Sukardiman, 2024).

In the context of religious pluralism in Indonesia, these findings have significant implications. Parmalim demonstrates that religious diversity is not merely a matter of theological differences, but also of differing ways of rationalizing religious experience. Thus, the recognition of local religions is not merely an administrative or legal issue, but also an epistemological one namely, the acknowledgment of the plurality of ways in which humans understand and experience the sacred. Furthermore, this discussion enriches the study of local religions by positioning Parmalim as an active agent in constructing religious meaning, rather than a passive object eroded by modernity. By examining Parmalim through the frameworks of the phenomenology of religion and local wisdom, this article demonstrates that local religions possess reflective and adaptive capacities on par with world religions. This opens the door to a more inclusive and equitable approach to the study of religion regarding the diversity of religious expression.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that Parmalim, as a local religion, cannot be understood through the framework of the rationality of world religions, which is doctrinal and formally theological in nature. Through a phenomenological approach to religion and the perspective of local wisdom, this study affirms that Parmalim possesses a coherent and meaningful internal religious rationality. This rationality is manifested in the concept of the deity Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, the structure of religious rituals, symbols of sanctity, and a code of ethics governing the relationship between humans, nature, and God. Thus, Parmalim is not merely a cultural tradition or a remnant of pre-modern beliefs, but a living religious system that functions in establishing the moral and social order of its adherents’ community. Furthermore, the findings of this article demonstrate that Parmalim’s rationality also operates at the social and contextual levels. Amid the dominance of world religions, modernity, and religious pluralism, the Parmalim community exhibits a reflective capacity for social adaptation without losing its religious identity. This survival strategy reflects a pragmatic and dialogical form of social rationality, which allows Parmalim to remain in existence while contributing to social harmony. Therefore, this article emphasizes the importance of epistemological recognition of the plurality of rationalities in religious life, particularly within the context of Indonesia’s diverse society.

DECLARATIONS

Author Contribution

Suci Janua Saputri & Supardi Dwimaputra: Writing-Preparation of original manuscript, Conceptualization, **Toni Nasution:** Visualization, Methodology, Improve Language, Investigation.

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Ethical Clearance

The place or location studied has agreed to conduct research and is willing if the results of this study are published.

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