

THE PERSISTENCE OF ANCESTOR VENERATION: A DIALOGICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRISTIANITY AND INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS IN INDONESIA*

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Abstract

Death does not mark the end of the relationship between the dead and the living. The bereaved family members receive help, strength and memories of the past, as well as an awareness of being part of a family lineage, from the deceased. The deceased receive respect, sustainability, and higher status than another human from their descendants. In social life, ancestor veneration functions as a type of social glue, maintaining social identity, even projecting meanings amid social fragmentations. This study will show the persistence and function of ancestor veneration among modern Christians in Indonesia, the resistance of local culture against the hegemony of modern culture, as well as the “the antithetic stance of the church”. At the same time, this study will also reveal changes in theology impacted by encounters with the indigenous culture in which ancestor veneration is kept. The encounter will be deemed dialogical.

Keywords

Ancestor veneration, dead, mortuary, *Mangongkal holi*, *Rambu Solo*, contextual theology

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INTRODUCTION

As a religion that has its roots overseas, Christianity in Indonesia has struggled to take root in the new soil. Christianity has, however, found its match in local or indigenous religions through the belief in the

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perpetuation of the soul after death and a closely related belief in the resurrection. It is common in most indigenous religions to accept the spirits of the dead as remaining among the living. Death does not disengage the dead from the living. It is just a change of form – the dead take the form of spirit while the living takes bodily form – but the dead are still around, mingling with the living. While maintaining the belief in the immortality of the soul, churches have found it hard to accommodate the concept of indigenous religions concerning the continued existence of the dead among the living. The churches have tried hard to disengage their members from believing in the spirits of the dead present among us. European missionaries in the past centuries had already started the battle against what they recognized as syncretism, that is, the mixture of faith in God and dead spirits. When Indonesia embraced modernity, *i.e.* the Western way of life, in the twentieth century, belief in the spirits of the dead, specifically the spirits of the ancestors, seemed to fade away. This turn gives a benefit to the church. However, the battle is not over yet. As revealed in the following discussions, ancestor veneration, even ancestor worship¹, is very much alive in Indonesia. This situation means the church continues its negotiation with indigenous religions. It is also a challenge for modernity to accept and learn from living tradition.

To describe the seamless struggle of the church with the belief in the existence of ancestors' spirits imbued in the practice of ancestor veneration, I choose the experience of two ethnic groups in Indonesia well known for their customary ways of carrying for their dead ancestors:

¹ The differentiation between ancestor veneration and ancestor worship is sharpened in the context of modern society and theological debates as the latter (worship) is considered to be more superstitious. Following Hardacre (2005: 321), who recognizes the controversy, argues that there is no need to exaggerate the difference. Hardacre explains, "Ancestor worship takes a variety of forms in different areas, and its attitudinal characteristics vary accordingly. The ancestors may be regarded as possessing power equivalent to that of a deity and hence may be accorded cult status and considered able to influence society to the same extent as its deities. Typically, the conception of ancestors is strongly influenced by ideas of other supernatural in society's religious system. Ancestors may be prayed to as having the power to grant boons or allay misfortune, but their effectiveness is regarded as naturally limited by the bonds of kinship. Thus, a member of a certain lineage prays only to the ancestors of that lineage; it would be regarded as nonsensical to pray to ancestors of any other lineage. Accordingly, members of other lineages are excluded from the ancestral rites of kinship groups of which they are not members. The religious attitudes involved in the worship of ancestors include filial piety, respect, sympathy, and sometimes, fear. The rites of death, including funerary and mortuary rituals, are regarded as falling within the purview of ancestor worship only when memorial rites beyond the period of death and disposition of the corpse are carried out as a regular function of a kinship group."

the Batak and Toraja. It happens that many members within these two groups are Christian and they have their ethnic churches. Despite the repressive attitude of the churches towards local or indigenous religion, I prefer to see their relationship as a dialogue. The dialogue is necessitated by the fact that many members of the churches are still practising indigenous religion though silently or not in a full version. It is also important to recognize that the churches cannot alienate themselves from their surrounding culture. In one way or another, the churches also include the culture in their life. In other words, the relation between the church and indigenous culture sometimes takes the form of confrontation, which can occasionally be affirmative.

“MANGONGKAL HOLI” AND “TUGU” IN BATAK LAND

Recently, there has been an increasing number of monuments erected in various styles in the Toba Batak homeland of Tapanuli and its surroundings near Lake Toba in North Sumatera. The monuments are repositories where a family's dead can be buried together with the ancestors on ancestral lands. Often, the dead have already been buried in other places, usually near where the deceased was living at the time of death. The Batak people are notoriously adventurous. The majority of their youth leave home for education and better jobs and may remain far from the homeland, in *tanah rantau* (literally: migration lands) for the rest of their lives. However, a significant aspect of Batak identity is to come home in death. Home is the origin of a clan while clan (*marga*) lies at the centre of Batak identity.² Bodies are usually buried temporarily until the family is ready to exhume the bones and rebury them with other dead members of the family in the clan monument in their homeland. The second burial is conducted with a rite called *Mangongkal holi-holi* (*mangongkal*: digging out, *holi*: bone). This tradition has long been passed down by the ancestors of the Batak people and is still well maintained today. The rite consists of several stages, starting from preparation, months before the day itself. During that preparation, all members of the extended family gather to discuss the technicalities to ensure they will

² The clan is built within a strict system of genealogy which flows from their one common origin, the King of Batak (*Si Raja Batak*). The system regulates all social functions. For example, in marriage, the distribution of tasks (blessing the wedding couple, welcoming the guests, preparing the food, etc.) goes according to the position of a clan in the genealogy.

be prepared to host representatives of their kinship lineages. According to Batak tradition, the extended family composes of several divisions such as the wife side, the husband side, etc., On the day itself, there are worship services conducted by the family from the wife's side (*hula-hula*). The worship services are conducted before going to the cemetery, followed by wearing *ulos* (embroidered cloth), digging out the bones, pouring the bones with water lemon and other rites, until the bones are reburied and a monument erected in the reburial site. The ceremony continues with a feast and prayers at the house of the hosting family.

Anthony Reid observed, "Today the ritual of *Mangongkal holi-holi*, for the collective reburial of the bones of members of a particular descent group in a large concrete tomb usually associated with a pillar, is the central activity linking urban Batak to their Tapanuli homeland." (Reid 2002:92). For a Batak who migrates to almost all regions in Indonesia, the home or ancestral land still has an important meaning. Even though they have succeeded in the diaspora they still highly esteem their ancestral land. Batak clan (*marga*) ties and culture can never be separated from the people no matter where they currently live.

Many of them have left their indigenous religion (*Parmalim*) and the belief in spirits (*tondi*) for Christianity, but they uphold their cultural tradition, which is hardly detached from the indigenous religion. Christianity cannot alienate Batak culture from among the people. Nevertheless, the relationship between Christianity and culture is difficult. For example, the church does not seem to welcome the rite of *Mangongkal holi*. If pastors participate in the ceremony, it is only for minor roles within the entire ceremony. The situation is better in the Catholic Church than among the Protestants. The Catholic Church makes room for the ceremony by offering liturgical worship that complements the traditional ceremonies. The Lutheran, Reformed, and Methodist Protestant churches take a more detached stance, silently tolerating as their people practice the ceremony.³ This gives an impression that the Protestant church has no firm position, though Pentecostal churches tend to oppose the practice more firmly. The reluctance of the church to accept mortuary rites such as *Mangongkal holi* expresses the fear that indigenous rituals would confuse the faith of the people. The churches intend to guard their members against believing in any power other than God's.

³ However, one of Batak Lutheran churches, GKPA, has a liturgy to commemorate the dead similar to the one of the Catholic Church.

Aside from being taught by the church to stay away from cultural tradition, Christian Batak who migrate outside the Batak homeland are also influenced by modernization which moves them even further from tradition. Through education, exposure to science and modern technology, they experience a transformation of life, which may lead them to look at the old tradition with scepticism. As is common everywhere, the modern mind finds it hard to accept pre-modern traditions that are often enmeshed with mystical experiences. However, for urban Batak, modern life cannot answer all their needs, in the sense that being a rational modern people does not always match with reality. Individualism, as a common urban lifestyle, needs to be balanced with communalism. Integrating oneself into tradition is an act of communalism. Through the integration, there is a guarantee for the individual to remain attached to the family and clan, including deceased ancestors. The combination of modern and traditional does not seem to create a divided mindset for urban Batak.⁴ On the contrary, if others may see the incompatibility of modern and traditional world views, the urban Batak see the two as complementary. With regards to *Mangongkal holi* in which people erect monuments to pay tribute to their ancestors, those who practice it will get benefits.⁵ The benefits are not necessarily superstitious. In the following, I quote Reid's rather long assessment as I find it very helpful in understanding the coexistence of tradition and modernity.

1. Status competition is a factor in the splendour of the *tugu* and the opulence of the feasting that accompanies its erection. The *tugu* erected by one *marga* provokes jealousy in other *margas* until they can outdo it. ... More positively put, 'the [lineage] group do it to raise their prestige [*martabat*]. It is a question of asserting who we are, of knowing ourselves as a group and a lineage' (Samosir/Jakarta informant).
2. *Tugu* are erected, and *mangongkal holi-holi* feasts held, 'so that the elders are respected [*asa sangap natuatua i*']'. It is merely the Batak way of carrying out the Christian injunction to 'honour thy father and mother', and the universal respect for the dead (Simanjuntak 1995) ...

⁴ Vergouwen argues that "in a society such as the Batak, which is strongly orientated genealogically, many remnants of the old animistic concepts will live on for a long time." (1964: 103). I agree with him but want to add that the attachment to the old concepts is also a strategy that seems successful in facing the vast changing social conditions that are happening now.

⁵ The erection of the monument or *tugu* may come from the ancient time but lately, the number of the rite multiplies significantly. The increasing number of the *tugu* erection may show the growth of wealth of the erectors who tend to be urban Bataks.

3. *Tugu*-building represents a kind of contract between richer and poorer, urban and rural, younger and older members of a lineage...The construction and feasting do of course transfer wealth from rich to poor and city to village, perhaps enabling some marginal villages to survive and certainly aiding the refurbishment of houses. More fundamentally, rich and poor are all able to honour their dead with unprecedented grandeur. Whereas the older reburials in sarcophagi were only for the lionised founder of a lineage (*ompu parsadaan*), the modern *mangongkal holi-holi* caters for the whole descent group.

One Samosir educator explained that Bataks would regard somebody who built schools and hospitals as simply big-noting himself selfishly. But if he stages a *tugu* ceremony he is raising his whole lineage. As a result, all will be grateful to him.

4. The *tugu*, and particularly the ritual feasting that accompanies it, consolidates and strengthens the lineage and the identity within it, which would otherwise be eroded. Edward Bruner (1987: 145) has expressed in Turner-esque language what the experience means for the urban Toba Batak:

It helps to bridge the perceived discrepancy between the ideal image of Batak society and the way that society is experienced. It relieves the tension between Batak talk about their *adat* as sacred and timeless, and the inner experience of estrangement. The *tugu*, as all monuments, are a bridge between the past and the present ... The *tugu* ceremony recaptures time as the Batak returns to a former aspect of his own or his family's historical experience. The *tugu* ritual becomes a mirror of his former self ... He goes from the secular urban world to the magical *adat* world of his kinsmen, and together with his clansmen and affines that he performs his genealogy.

If this has profound psychological value for urban Bataks, it has concrete ones for village-dwellers. As virtually all aspire to have their children achieve higher education and employment in the cities, they need contacts who can provide city accommodation and contacts.

Most Batak informants, especially the rural ones who tend to set the agenda of feasting, would express the point of solidarity in terms of what they believe as derived from the tradition itself. ...

5. Finally, what is the role of the ancestral spirits themselves in this process? Many informants (especially rural ones) attest that the original purpose of reburying ancestors in beautiful tomb monuments is still a powerful one, even though those reviving the practice are now urban, affluent, Christian and educated.

As expressed by Vergouwen (1933: 70), the pre-Christian idea was that in the spirit world

the spirits of deceased ancestors occupy a particular place, especially the spirits of those who, in their lifetime, became rich, had power and material goods and whose descendants are many. These spirits, the *sumangot ni ompu* = the revered spirits of the ancestors, desire to be worshipped and

honoured with offerings to continue to be active in promoting the welfare of the descendants of these ancestors.

For many rural people the spirits of the dead, the *begu*, are capable of doing much harm to the living, especially their close descendants unless the correct rituals are carried out and the bones properly placed in a fine *tambak*. Continued prayers and offerings to the dead, especially to those who have had abundant children, land and other assets, will increase the *sahala* (charisma) of these potent forebears, and enable them to shower their blessings on the living.

The chief evidence for this as a continuing motive is the role played by ritual specialists who explain infertility, illness and other misfortunes in terms of dissatisfied spirits. ... Frequently, something unusual happens at such rituals to indicate the presence of the spirits, such as a dancer becoming possessed while the music of the *gondang* is at its most intense. Almost all participants accept these phenomena as deriving from the spirit world, though differing as to whether they should be seen as a sign of continued blessing or a sinister throwback to animism. As one Toba Catholic brother said to me, 'the spirits are not a belief; they are facts'. Like other religious presences, they come and go, are seen to some but not to others, but serve as signs of connection with a world of power, a world beyond death. (Reid 2002: 99-101)

The influence of the spirit world in the life of the Batak people is pervasive. From a theological point of view, it creates a question of how the spirit of the dead can be reconciled with the spirit of God. Whilst the Catholic quoted in Reid's report above said that the spirits are fact, not just a matter of belief, in Christian teaching, the presence of the Holy Spirit which is the Spirit of God is real as well. Would the two kinds of spirits be seen as working in tandem or rather in contestation? It is interesting to hear the argument of Archbishop Anicetus Sinaga of the Archdiocese of Medan (2009-2018) about Batak indigenous religion. Facing the objection of his fellow Christians (Catholic and Protestant) to *Parmalim*, the indigenous religion of Batak, Sinaga, "presents traditional Batak religions as a very close ally to Catholic doctrine" (Steenbrink 2015:455). Protestant churches may find it difficult to agree with this view, whereas the reaction from the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians towards the acceptance of the spirit of the ancestors is typically hostile. The Pentecostal and Charismatic Christians make a clear line of division between the spirit of God, which should be strongly held by the faithful and the spirit of the ancestors or others, which is not of God and should be denied without hesitation. This hard stance has lured some of Christian Batak, often followed with the decision to move out from the previous church deemed too lenient to the belief in spirits. Conflicts

between Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians and local believers often occur. Further consideration of this theological issue is needed. I will come back to this point of theological issues after discussing another culture famous for its mortuary rite with close links to ancestor veneration.

“RAMBU SOLO” IN TORAJA LAND

For the people of Toraja, in the northern part of South Sulawesi, life is preparation for death. The land where this tribe lives is central in the imagination of the people. It is the land of the ancestors where the dead were laid to rest and their descendants would like to be buried. Death does not separate the family tie, conversely, it reunites the dispersed members of the family. Those who have already moved to other places, be it near or far when they die they are going to be reunited with their parents and other family members who have departed before them. In the meantime, the rite of burial is complex, yet conducted meticulously. The first and second burials each demand many days of rituals performed precisely involving families and neighbours, costing not a little money. The mourning family must be ready to perform and to take the financial burden at whatever cost. For them, it is time to show their honour and dedication to their elders.

The rites have become a tourist attraction, creating a good income for the locals who otherwise would be struggling with the problem of poverty. The tourists come to visit the six famous limestone hills with openings carved into their sides where the mummified bodies of the ancestors are placed. Statues of the dead ancestors are erected and dressed in formal clothing. Every year, during July and August, the great rite of *Rambu Solo* is performed. It is the busiest time of the year. The preparation began a year before with the construction of temporary huts for those who help in the rituals. Those helpers, the family members, neighbours and acquaintances are accommodated and supplied with daily meals by the hosting family. When the time arrives, the family receives hundreds of guests who flow into the house. The reception has its steps from the welcoming speech by the chief elders of *adat* (customary law), common feasts, performances of burial dances, and so on. Most important and well known is the slaughter of sacrificial animals, water buffaloes, which are chosen for the colour and markings which make them very expensive. The number of buffaloes to be slaughtered ranges from 20 to 100, depending on the financial ability of the family. To buy the buffalo, the

family receives contributions from their relatives. It is considered the work of the entire family, nuclear and extended, from closest to far-off relatives. The rite unites all of the family. The rite includes corpse wrapping process (*Ma'Tudan Mebalun*), decorating the coffin with gold and silver string (*Ma'Roto*), parading the wrapped corpse to a barn until its ready to be buried (*Ma'Popengkalo Alang*), and parading the corpse from *Tongkonan* House to cemetery complex called *Lakkian* (*Ma'Palao* or *Ma'Pasonglo*). Final events are a parade of buffalo which later will be slaughtered as animal sacrifice, dancing performance, and feasts.

The dead ancestors are never referred to as deceased, but rather as *tomakula* (person with a fever) or *to mamma* (sleeping person). This title shows the belief that the dead are somehow still alive. Before being placed on high hills as their final burial place, the bodies of the deceased are first placed at home, seated in the living room and treated as if they are still alive. There is no feeling of fear or anxiety from the family who live together in the same house. They carry on their daily activities as usual with the dead body seated nearby. This can go on for weeks or even years. It is not until the right moment arrives that the body is finally buried. The process begins by moving the body to the yard of the deceased's home, then to a temporary tomb, and finally to the burial hill.

Hollan and Wellenkamp, who conducted ethnographic research in Toraja, found several important points about the meaning of death for Torajans. First, when people die it is because they have reached the endpoint of their *sunga* (predetermined life span). The Toraja people hold that life is a series of trips that must be taken and the journey ends in death. Second, even though death is an end, it does not mean that death is without significance. People who die remain with the living. When the bodies are still placed in the home, they are invited into conversation like the living. Even though they are dead, they are still considered alive. When finally placed in the last cemetery, the family can still talk with them and ask them for help in times of crisis. Death is a continuation of life. Third, it follows that death is not threatening or stressful. Elders prepare for death by telling their grandchildren about how they should be dressed when the time comes (Hollan and Wellenkamp 1996: 175-179).

Meanwhile, Edwin de Jong⁶, who studied the economic and cultural aspects of the Toraja people, expressed the wonder of many regarding the huge cost of the burial rite despite the simple life lived by the people

⁶ Edwin de Jong, *Making a Living between Crises and Ceremonies in Tana Toraja*, Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2013.

in the area. The cost of one funeral can reach billions of rupiah (tens of thousands of dollars) which may be equal to ten years' worth expenditures under normal conditions for the family. Compared to the daily life of the people in Toraja, even in the capital (Rantepao), it is hard to understand how such the huge expense can be met while average people in that area may not always be able to keep up with the increasing economic demands. One of the most burdensome expenses for the average Indonesian family is the cost for children's education. Torajans are known for having high expectations for their children's education. They try their hardest to send their children to big cities with better quality schools. They are willing to pay whatever it costs for their children to achieve the highest level of education. Such education demands are already hard for many people, but the burden of the costly burial rite still seems acceptable. De Jong, following Hefner, argues that for the Torajans, burial rites are all important. This view should not be interpreted as magical thinking. The cost of the rite relates to some sort of repayment that society would give to the family. The bigger the expenditure, the more prestigious the family is in the eyes of society. For society, the cost of burial reflects the price of the most important matter in life. There is nothing to the family more valuable than burying the parents according to the tradition. Status depends on sacrifice for one's parents. If a family can impress society by their willingness to perform a great rite, their social status will increase. The high status will affect social recognition, which may result in the possibility of gaining the highest rank, such as in appointments to government offices. De Jong argued,

...the Torajan practice of everyday life is not only to be found in life but also in death. Death in Tana Toraja is a public happening, and the meaning of life is a good death. Funeral ceremonies are central in the life of most Torajans and are the answer to death. A better death leads to more prestige and a better position. Death is, as it were, the last opportunity to make something of your life...Death is more than an abstract concept; ancestors are, for example, still living on in wooden statues (*tau tau*) or even present in the house, waiting to be buried. If you give the dead a good funeral, this will be repaid in daily life through a good harvest or good health, for example. It is a different way of life, another rationality (De Jong 2013: 294).

In the case of Torajans, ancestor veneration has nothing to do with superstition. It is not an act accompanied by an irrational wish that the children could derive a blessing from the dead parents through unexplainable ways. It is rather a social act, a negotiation among the people to gain

a better or higher position in the world of the living. Money is not a problem when it comes to respecting the dead. A good life is determined by how the living treats the dead.

IN DEFENSE OF THE PRESENCE OF THE ANCESTORS

The works of Rev. Mery Kolimon and Fr. Alex Jebadu are a good example of how to deal seriously with the issue of local culture and established theology taught by the church and in theological schools. Rev. Mery Kolimon, a Protestant theologian and leader of the largest church in (West) Timor and surrounding islands, wrote her doctoral dissertation on the empowerment of local people in Timor. She includes healing empowerment conducted by traditional healers who use methods of healing different from those of medical doctors. Whereas, Fr. Alex Jebadu, a Catholic theologian who teaches at the Ledalero Seminary, in Maumere, Flores, in the same province of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), focuses his doctoral dissertation and some other writings on the belief in spirits. Both theologians bring to the fore their respective ethnic customs which challenge Christian orthodoxy. Their works are a good example of how to deal seriously with the issue of local culture with the established theology, taught by the church and in theological schools.

Kolimon proposes a renewal in the theological discourse based on the idea of empowerment. She derives much of her thoughts from feminist aspirations. This deliberate choice of feminism as the source of the struggle is apt. As a woman theologian and minister, she is well aware of the difficulties of women to express themselves in a culture that does not value women as much as men. Nevertheless, her discussion of traditional healing shows that people who need to be empowered are not only women. In the face of modernism, much of traditional or local wisdom, as Indonesians usually say, suffer from marginalization. Some of the traditional aspects are even diminished. Kolimon does not differentiate the problem of the marginalization of local tradition from the problem of injustice born by women. Feminism in her thought is not only about the destiny of women, but also about anybody in a powerless situation. She brings to the fore the marginalization of traditional healers. However, in her region, as in almost every region in Indonesia, traditional healing or alternative healing, as Indonesians usually call it, is not just about the healers themselves. It is about the worldview of the

society. The society welcomes alternative healing because they see it as working. It works because not every sickness and problem can be resolved by a doctor or through modern science. In this link, the presence and participation of ancestors play a significant role. According to the cosmology of those people, there are three layers of existence. First is the world of the living. Above there are the spirit world of the ancestors and other celestial beings. At the top is a heaven where God exists. However, there is no barrier between the layers to prevent the higher beings to come down and work for or with the living. Help can be asked from God as well as from the ancestors. The ancestors do not work alone but together with God. Therefore, belief in ancestors' power does not negate belief in God. They can go together. When people in Timor and other islands in Indonesia do not abandon the belief in the existence of deceased ancestors but rather hold it together with their Christian faith, there is no problem of dualism as the modern mind might judge it. "Even a great healer doesn't possess the power of his/her own. It is God's power" writes Kolimon (2008: 199). With strong language, Kolimon then asks her fellow Christians to change their minds. "We need to learn to find the God who has been and still is working through the traditional healer" (Kolimon 2008: 199). Although she does not mean to embrace all aspects of local tradition uncritically, Kolimon's suggestion to accept tradition has invoked a strong challenge. It is important to see her base argument. She seems to agree with prominent thinkers in Asia who argue that the typical Asian way of thinking is holistic. Perhaps not everybody would agree to it, but, at least, it has some truth, which deserves attention. Holistic thinking opposes compartmental thinking in which the world is seen as divided into sections. Concerning theology, the holistic view would argue that God works with many means. There is no need to limit the mean and the locus of God's works. For the church, the challenge is to open itself up to the possibility that God works outside the church. For the people who follow and believe the local tradition, they should be convinced that their way of life is within the blessing of God. This is the empowerment that Kolimon is aiming at. It goes beyond the limit of life. As the tradition reveres the ancestors, they too are included in the empowerment.

In the meantime, Fr. Alex Jebadu is also arguing along this line. While Kolimon brings to the fore various kinds of social and political empowerment, Jebadu chooses to deal with local beliefs which are usually seen as opposed to Christian faith and modernity. Among them is ancestor veneration. He explains, "The main reason why ancestor veneration is

rejected or at least criticized is that many views it as idolatrous. The wide use of the phrase ‘ancestor worship’ in the works of many scholars, especially anthropologists, and of theologians who negate the special role of superhuman beings and semi-gods and who hold a belief in God without mediators and in salvation without mediation, already indicates that ancestor veneration in their understanding is idolatrous” (Jebadu 2009: 165-6). From Jebadu’s argument, it is obvious that the term ancestor veneration is chosen instead of ancestor worship. The latter has a stronger connotation concerning religion. The term worship describes an action which is aimed at God. In monotheistic religions, the God that is worshipped should be only one. No other being can be worshipped, less it falls into heresy. There is no problem if the claim is directed for internal usage. However, often the assertion to worship only to one God has an impact on others outside the community. Worshipping the one and only God is often contrasted with worshipping many gods, which includes the worship of spiritual beings powerful than God. From a monotheistic view, the worship of many gods is wrong. Therefore, the claim that there is only one God does not only mean to confirm a belief but also to condemn other beliefs. The claim is repeatedly used to condemn religions of others and other denominations within one religion. Jebadu does not agree with the term ancestor worship.⁷ To him, the term reflects a negative view of the practice that people in his land and many other lands in Indonesia follow. They do not worship, but rather they venerate their ancestors. Jebadu argues against the negative view by explaining what idolatry actually is. He studies etymology and the historical use of the term. In the end, he concludes that the categories applied to idolatry are not found in the practice of ancestor veneration. Ancestors are not the object of worship. They are only honoured as one honours the other or the young honour the older ones. In the Bible too, there is a command to honour parents which are given by God and meant to be executed as religious conduct. Honouring parents means worshipping God. Ancestor veneration is social and familial conduct. Nonetheless, Jebadu also warns that in societies where the practice is still held, there is no separation between mundane and religious matters. Thus, ancestor veneration, which aims at paying respect to deceased ancestors, is at the same time considered to be social and religious activities. Jebadu’s conclusion is worth quoting here

⁷ As observed by Philipus Tule and Susanne Rodemeier (Steenbrink 2015:263-266), however, Catholicism is, in fact, lenient to ancestor worship in contrast to Protestantism.

First, ancestor veneration has nothing to do with the worship of lifeless images or *eidōlon*. Instead, it primarily consists of venerating and loving human life, that is, the souls of the dead which survive corporal death and continue to engage in an enduring communion with their living relatives – a belief which is also very fundamental in Christian faith. *Second*, ancestor veneration has nothing to do with the worship of demons hiding in images – statues, paintings or sculptures – which the early Fathers of the Church claimed was the danger of idolatry. Instead, it is veneration of living spirits – the souls of the dead. The ancestors are not demons or evil spirits. They are distinctly different from evil spirits. The carved images of ancestors found in some traditional societies of Africa and Asia are not intended to be representational or abstract but conceptual and evocative. Using the stylized form and symbolic details, these images convey the characteristics of the ancestors and help to make present among the living the spiritual reality of the ancestors. Thus, the carved ancestral icon enables the world of the living community and the world of the dead to come together for the benefit of human life. It is similar to a picture or statue of a saint. They are not meant to substitute the saints themselves. A photo of my mother is not a substitute for my mother. Yet, it helps me to remember my mother and to arouse my love and longing for her. *Third*, ancestor veneration has nothing to do with the worship of creatures in place of God, since the souls of the dead are never viewed, approached or treated as God. Instead, they are viewed as human beings who have achieved a higher status, a status of being closer to God. From this position, they can play an intermediary role between God and the living — a belief which is also central to the Christian faith, especially in the Catholic and Orthodox Churches (Jebadu 2009: 173-4).

Much of Jebadu's arguments, which are taken from the dogma of the Catholic Church, may not sound familiar or easily acceptable to Protestants. The communion between souls of the dead and the living relatives, intermediary role of the dead, and perhaps the use of images sound alien to the ears of the Protestants. Nevertheless, as Jebadu directs his message to Christians at large, it shows that this is not just a problem for Protestants. The Protestant may have a harder time accepting the idea that venerating ancestors would not need new thinking. There are already some theological bases to support the acceptance as argued by Jebadu. However, as indicated by Jebadu, despite family resemblances to Catholic teachings, the existence of ancestors among the living may also be difficult to accept for Catholics. After the Second Vatican Council, the winds of change have been felt with regards to the acceptance of local cultures. However, it seems not enough to push the church to be more open for ancestor veneration. In the current context perhaps it is not just the church that has to change, but also those

who have been educated with modern science and lifestyle. Modern education and civilization have contributed a great deal in turning the view of the people away from familiarity with local customs.

The question, however, remains whether there are any limits in accepting the practices of ancestor veneration. What if the ancestors play a more powerful role or attract more attention than imagined by Jebadu? Jebadu does not agree that the ancestors be seen as a replacement for God, but that can happen. God may still be given a place, even the highest one. It is not only the Christians who agree to this but the followers of local religions also equally agree. After all, in local cosmologies, the Supreme Being is not to be mixed with the spirits. There are different levels and places of life between the spirits of the dead and God(s). Their functions also differ. Nevertheless, there are times when the spirits are acting almost like God. In times of crisis, a family may ask for help from its dead ancestors. It does not mean that they do not ask for help from God. It does not matter if both sources are invoked when needed. It is better to imagine that in that worldview there is no division, at least not a sharp one, between God and ancestors. At the same time, the involvement of the ancestor spirits in real life is also acknowledged, just like the involvement of God. Sometimes people might feel that the presence of the ancestors is closer than that of God. However, despite the closeness with the ancestors, they do not deny the power of God. The God/gods in local religions are not the jealous God as imagined by some monotheistic conceptions. Jebadu does not seem to touch on this point. He concentrates on how to cleanse the ancestors, as it were, but leaves the possibility that the problem may lie in the concept of God. A God who does not want to share power may see the existence of ancestors as trouble. Nonetheless, with a God who is ready to work together with others, the ancestors can be seen as co-workers. Once the ancestors are accepted in this way, their existence among the living would not be differentiated from God's presence in the world. The ancestors are as present as God. Their presence is as real as God's. Perhaps to apply the worship for such kind of ancestor is still awkward, but to deny that they can be treated like God might ignore the fact that they are indeed treated as such by the practitioners of ancestor veneration. I disagree with Jebadu argument above, that we should differentiate between ancestor veneration and ancestor worship. The difference between the two is not always as clear as Jebadu wants it. Instead, I rather go with Hardacre (see footnote 1) who sees in the practice people may not just venerate but worship their ancestors' spirits.

In the Chinese tradition of ancestor veneration and in many other similar traditions too, the ancestors are treated with homage.⁸At burial time, the deceased is given goods and food they are fond of. It is believed that despite being dead, they are still like living beings. They do their daily activities from eating, drinking, and even working and they would need sustenance and relevant equipment. The rite of giving homage does not end with the burial. At certain times after a burial, reverence continues to be offered either at the tomb or in the house on a table placed in front of the picture of the ancestor. The family does this as a matter of obligation, an honour to their elders, out of fear that the less they do the angrier the deceased will become and do bad things to them. Whatever their reason is, by performing the rituals the ancestors are kept alive and take care of their descendants in the world of living just as the descendants take care of their progenitors. It is a mutual relationship, which results in family bonding. A family is eternally together. This concept of family is pervasive in Asia, even though it may not be universal. There is no objection to this value from Christianity as far as I know. To be united as a family is even dearly charged by the church. Still, to acknowledge the presence of the spirits of the ancestors can sound like magic, superstition, and even insane. Jebadu has already refuted that characterization, but he is not clear whether he means the ancestors are present in spirit or just as a form of remembrance like the photo of his mother that he offers as an analogy.

THE SPIRITS OF ANCESTOR AND GOD

Bryan Wilson (2003) succinctly describes the declining role of religion in a society that sees moral orders as the guarantee of social welfare. In Wilson's writing, the guarantee of social welfare is called salvation. Wilson refers to the present-day society that, due to globalization, would not be that different whether in developed or developing countries. Although religion is losing its grip in societal life, it has by no means disappeared altogether. It is evident that religion tries to adjust itself voluntarily or, because there is no other way to reach the current situation, by offering a message supportive of the ideological trend, that is,

⁸ This is the tradition that I grew up and participate in. In another article, I explained the tension that I experienced as a Chinese Christian in the biographical model. (Setio 2012)

individualism. Wilson says, “processes of individuation were becoming apparent within the social system generally, and it is not surprising that religion, too, should have reached a stage of development in which the salvation of individuals – now considered independently of their corporate or communal affiliations, such as they now were – should have become a central focus of what remained of religious enterprise” (2003: 41). This observation may not represent the whole situation of religion, especially when one sees the practice of religion in countries like Indonesia where individualism is not as strong as in the West. Yet, as a matter of principle, the process of individualization of and in religion is indeed occurring, even in Indonesia where communalism is still the dominant way of life. The persistent appearance of ancestor veneration in a form of rite and thinking as described above should be seen as a counter to that process of individualization, both in society and in church. The ancestors are a symbol of communal cohesion, the veneration given to them is an act of reinstatement of the significance of family and community.

The times are changing rapidly. We are now moving in an era of the fourth industrial revolution in which the progress and use of information and communication technologies have immensely altered the way of life of people around the world. Human interaction is becoming less physical, more virtual. What is real does not depend on the natural presence but on a result of endless interaction of impressions in the artificial world of the Internet. Baudrillard famously called this phenomenon as hyperreality. It has also altered the anatomy and understanding of work which according to Wilson, “...the depersonalization of work activities threatened to reduce them to the status of the machine” (2003: 44). We are reminded by Marxist analysis of the relation between subject and object in industrial society which sadly transforms human life into dehumanization, or thingification, a condition where people are treated as objects. The cost that the society has to pay is huge. Again, Wilson aptly observes, “Society ceases to be held together by shared substantive values. Its unity is no longer to be found in a widely diffused common *mentalité*. Instead of that kind of social cohesion, there is a more mechanical social integration...” (2003: 49-50). In the face of this change, religion seems to be no longer viable, a relic of the past. But, in the Indonesian context, the religion that seems to be in decline should be understood to mean the imported religions legitimated by the state, one of which is Christianity. The indigenous religions seem to be able to prolong their significance in the heart of their followers. They do make

a difference in their lives. The questions are: how do the indigenous religions play their significant role? What can they contribute to modern life? How could they contribute to the betterment of the people? I focus my answers to these questions on the topic of this article, namely ancestor veneration. From this perspective, it is possible to make the following points:

1. *God is remote, the ancestors are close.* Christianity teaches God based on biblical witness. In the Old Testament, Yahweh is introduced as the national God. He is God of the entire nation of Israel. In the Book of Isaiah (especially chapter 45), Yahweh's power is even broader, covering all nations of the world. In the New Testament, Jesus is also uplifted to the highest position as the Lord and Saviour of the world (e.g. Colossians 1.16). Christian dogmas confirm the superiority of Christ (God). There is an ironic impact to the claim of the superiority of Christ which may never be wanted, in which God becomes remote from the people because God who belongs to everybody does not exclusively belong to certain people. The historical fact that Christianity was brought from abroad (Europe) even increased the feeling of distance. It is different from the position of the ancestors. Unlike God, the ancestors remain close to their descendants. The sense of belonging is very present in the image and imagination of each community's ancestors. Thus, it is understandable if the ancestors cannot be removed from the awareness and memories of their children and grandchildren. Ancestors provide an irreplaceable sense of intimacy and coexistence across time.

2. *Ancestors are more binding to the family lineage than God can be.* Ancestors connect with their descendants through flesh and blood relationships, whether real or fictive. It is undeniable that in traditional societies the trans-generational family gets the first place. A person's identity is determined by his or her family. In the past, extended families lived in the same house. At present, there are still quite a lot of married children who have their houses built near their parents. They may not be in the same location as in the past but remain close together. Children feel responsible for the well being of their parents and they want to stay watchful over their ageing parents. Even after children marry, relationships with parents are still maintained. God's presence is certainly very meaningful, but it cannot replace the family bond. God is even understood as condoning those who want to maintain the unity of the family by granting abundant blessings. An everlasting unity of the family is

taken as a sign of God's accompaniment to the family. While to remain bonded with the ancestors is to remain bonded with God, the reverse may not always ascertain.⁹

3. *Daily problems are too small to be dealt with by God.* The presence of ancestors does not merely occur at certain moments. The *Mangongkal holi* and *Rambu Solo* have geared the attention of the people to the buried ancestors. The presence of the ancestors during the ceremony is obvious, but the ancestors were not only with their sons and daughters during the ceremony. They remain with their children and grandchildren before and after the ceremony. When their families are busy with daily activities, they also participate in it. Such awareness becomes customary. At certain times, as when experiencing difficulties, the family contacts the ancestors. They share their problems with the deceased ancestors to be heard or sometimes to ask for help. They also approach God when there is a problem, but often they only ask God for help for greater things. When the problem is small, they prefer to call on their ancestors. It could also be that both ancestors and God are summoned together. In any case, the involvement of ancestors in their descendants' lives includes mundane matters which may seem too small to ask God about.

4. *Ancestral status has more impact on social relations.* In a society that emphasizes the importance of family, recognition of the individual is often derived from who their parents or ancestors are. If ancestors were famous, their offspring will also become famous. Social acceptance of people whose ancestors are famous will be better than those who were not. Families try to guard the good name of their ancestors so that there will be respect from others. If there were family members who fall into wrongdoing, the whole family suffers the embarrassment. Shame may be unforgivable, and thus they should avoid it with all their strength. Good social relations depend on the good name of the family, including that of the bygone generations. Descendants would be thankful to their ancestors for inheriting a good name that could uplift their social status.

⁹ E. Gerrit Singgih (2010) uses the fact of the system of the extended Indonesian (and Asian) family which has made way for the thought that deceased ancestors still mingled with their living descendants. In contrast, a nuclear family system common among Westerners has hindered the acceptance of such thought.

5. *Christianity also has a belief in spirit and magic.* For Christians, only God can be accepted as a powerful spirit. Ancestral spirits are not recognized. However, the recognition of ancestral spirits is closely related to the recognition of God's spirit. When taught about the existence of God's spirit, the imagination of the people goes to preternatural beings. The spirits can act outside the ordinary. In turn, this teaching allows for the acceptance of other realities different from the physical one. This way of thinking is the same as those who accept the existence of ancestral spirits. It is shamanic, or magical. Just like God's spirit, ancestral spirits are also received with fear and trembling. Nonetheless, not all Christian streams emphasize the magical side of God. Pentecostal and Charismatic streams have more insistence in this point compared to that of others. Typologically, there is no difference between these kinds of belief with the belief in the power of ancestral spirits. The difference is only with the source of power. The one claims power originates from God, while the other perceives it as originating from the ancestral spirits.

6. *The need for animism in the modern world.* Life today is very much dominated by materialism. Only visible or physical things exist. There is nothing outside the visible. Rationalism teaches doubts about things that do not make sense. Trust in supernatural powers has been cut down, but the modern world longs for the lost supernaturalism. The practice of ancestor veneration is carried out not only by modest villagers but also by people accustomed to modern lifestyles in the cities. Belief in preternatural spirits originated in pre-modern times which survived into modern times, does not mean a return to pre-modern times. Nor is it evidence of a society that is not yet touched by modernity. Modern people can live in two ways of thinking at the same time, both modern and pre-modern. Rationalism and irrationalism complement each other in the modern mind.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that modernity and Christianity can live together with local traditions, which belong to ancient times. It is contrary to the common perception that the worlds of the ancient and modern are incompatible. The lessons from the Batak and Torajan communities can be thought of like lessons for others in Indonesia, indeed even for many outside the country, anyone who lives in two different worlds, the world

of ancestral tradition and the world of later imported religions. With the recent turn to religious conservatism, the influence of indigenous religions and customs can play a significant role in appeasing the stiffening flow of world religions (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism). With their inclusive and cosmo-centric attitudes, indigenous religions can be expected to perform a balancing force to the hegemonic, dominating, anti-dialogue, logocentric, foundationalist, and anthropocentric attitudes of the major religions today.

Concerning theology, there is a dire need for a renewed theology, a theology which gives space to the involvement of ancestors' spirits in creative works. This theology is no longer placing God as the sole creator, rather as one among the many creators. At the same time, as creation is continuous it is impacting but also impacted. God does not only move but also is moved, so with the others. The world is a web that connects everybody and every event, in the past, in the present and the future.

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