

# Traditional Culture, Christianity and Globalization in Indonesia: The Case of Torajan Christians

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## INTRODUCTION

The theme of this presentation is the interrelation of religion, culture and globalization among the Torajan Christians in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. For the Torajan, religious identity is mainly Christian, as institutionalized in the Torajan Church, where the encounter between traditional culture and Christianity is very much from the perspective of doctrinal formulations of the church.

Globalization among the Torajan was experienced in three waves, namely Christianization, the tourist industry, and urbanization. These experiences culturally developed a communal identity distinct from Islamic neighbors and revitalized traditional culture as a new way of expressing personal or clan and ethnic self-identity.

In contrast to the radical reaction of fundamentalism or secularization towards globalization, the Torajan revival of socio-cultural self-identity is conducive to pluralism. Torajan Christians, for example, are remarkably open to peaceful interfaith relations. It seems that the lived reality of plurality in the clan-house system of family life, coupled with the need to live in harmony with others in the close tribal community of Torajan, with exposure to a host of neighbors and foreigners, developed a mentality of tolerance and peace. This tendency was also supported by certain developments in the church as it was exposed to the realities of national reformation and social conflicts.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Modern Christianity came to the Indonesian archipelago together with Western traders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The first baptism was in 1534 in Tobelo, Halmahera, by a Roman Catholic priest. The famous Asian Apostle, Francis Xavier, along with other Jesuit and Franciscan priests, baptized many native people in Eastern Indonesia in the short Roman Catholic period. In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, trade and political power was taken over by the Dutch East Indies Company, and, following the Western Reformation adagium of *cuius regio eius religio*, most of the Roman Catholic congregations were forced to become Calvinist Protestants. But under the Dutch in general, there was no serious Christian mission until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when mission boards in the Netherlands and Germany sent missionaries to works among “infidels” in Indonesia. The Dutch colonial power protected her own political and economical interests by applying restrictions to the missions. There were to be no missions among the Muslims, and therefore, most of the regions, such as Java and Bali, were closed. Only remote regions of tribal people with their respective tribal religions were allowed to be Christianized. But the power of the Gospel found its own way into the different parts of Java and to the Balinese. The main mission fields were among the Bataks and Nias people in North Sumatra, the Dayaks in Kalimantan, and among the people in the Eastern Indonesia islands.

The Torajan is one of the four major ethnic groups of South Sulawesi. The three others, Bugineese, Makassarreese, and Mandareese, were converted to Islam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There were some attempts to introduce the Christian Gospel to South Sulawesi during the Roman Catholic era in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but these failed due to political, religious and cultural factors. The Torajan lived in the highland and for a long time were closed off from surrounding regions. There were some campaigns from the Islamic kingdoms to conquer and Islamize the Torajan but none succeeded. On the contrary, threats from their neighbors united the different autonomous regions as one people in one integrated region, poetically called “a land of full moon and circled sun”. There is an oft-repeated story of Torajan leaders with “one vision and one commitment” who lead their people to resist the invasion of huge Bone Kingdom warriors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually a traditional peace ritual between the Torajan and its Buginese neighboring powers was performed and sealed by a religiously sanctioned oath. From their Buginese neighbors the Torajan learned and developed dice gambling and cock-fighting. Islam was received among a minority of Torajan on the eastern border close to the Luwu Kingdom, mainly through marriages and kinships. The Torajan were exposed to modern history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to its famous Arabica coffee and its slave trade. The internal intrigues and

rivalries among neighboring kingdoms brought the intervention of the Dutch colonial “pacification” troops in the first decade of the last century, followed by the Christian missions.

Like some other remote regions in Indonesia, the Torajan underwent revolutionary change in the early decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Christian faith was introduced in 1908 through primary schools, and some years later, the Association of Dutch Reformed Mission (GZB) began a more systematic mission in the Torajan and Luwu regions. It was really hard work due to the Torajan’s strong traditional culture with its religious attachment. In the end, the Christian mission failed to subdue Torajan tradition.

The most important aspects of the Torajan culture are its clan house kinships and its rites for the dead (funeral feast or burial ceremony). By the time of occupation by Japanese navy troops in 1942 less than thirty percent of the population had been baptized. In 1947 the Christian congregations was organized under the synod of the Torajan church. Roman Catholic and other denominations were also accepted but only by a small number of Torajan.

The hardship under the Japan occupation was subsequently followed in turn by NICA (Netherland-Indies Civil Administration) efforts to crush the Indonesian independence movement and resistance from the revolutionary youths, and then by the persecution of Christians by Islamic guerrillas in the 1950s. The Torajan managed to resist the guerrillas, but the Christians in the Luwu regions, such as in Rongkong and Seko suffered very much. Villages were burned, and people were forced to convert to Islam. Many people were killed, and others fled to neighboring regions. There are no Christian congregations in the Rongkong region now because the refugees refused to go back. In contrast, Christians of the Seko regions fought back to free their homeland in the 1960s and brought back their people.

#### *TONGKONAN* ECCLESIOLOGY

As mentioned before, the Torajan culture is strongly attached to its tribal religion, centered on clan-house kinship (Tor: *tongkonan*) and its ritual for the deceased. The main problem encountered in the mission among Torajan Christian was how to deal with their strong cultural traditions. In the past, the simple approach the Dutch mission—that of rejecting religiously related customs and adopting positive aspects of Torajan culture to Christian life—seemed to treat Torajan culture fragmentarily. The Torajan Christians were either uprooted from their cultural tradition or forced to schizophrenically adapted two different ways of life. A Torajan theologian, Theo Kobong, dedicated his life and thought to this problem of developing a Torajan Christian theology of culture. His main theses follows

Richard Niebuhr's fifth paradigm of "Christ transforming culture." For the Torajan Christian it means transformation of the Torajan culture by the Gospel of Christ. The clan-house kinship at the core of Torajan culture, therefore, should be transformed from its genealogically limited relationships and its feudal value system to be a universal non-discriminative fellowship. Dr Kobong's thoughts on this theme are as follows:

The criteria for Torajan traditional communities is the respective *pangala-tondok* (the patriarch, the man who founded the community village) with their own ritual and customary laws. It is clear that we have to deal with it here at this very point. It seems that the solution is not so difficult. We have to choose either Christ or patriarch; or between Gospel (Word of God) and ritual and customary laws. Christ and patriarch can not be united; both cannot become criteria simultaneously. A Christian, therefore, has to choose. He/she believes and is committed to Christ or to the patriarch. A genuine Christian cannot choose other than Christ, take up his cross and follow him. This choice must be radical, because one cannot serve two masters. The Christian has to choose for Christ or for patriarch. This either/or choice consequently leads to refusal to leave all that belong to patriarch. It means to leave his ritual and customary laws, and at the end, his *tongkonan* (clan house), his community and culture. But the radical refusal of the structure of life pattern of patriarch is not the goal of this choice, because then it is a refusal to incarnation, or incarnation was not an event in the world and for the world. It will also mean that Christ did not come for the world, did not come for the people in the world as a whole. But incarnation means that Christ came to replace the patriarch. He came to his own people, included the patriarch, the head of the *tongkonan* community. He is more concrete to people in the framework of *tongkonan* structure that unites all groups and communities. As the concerned target is man, community, i.e. *tongkonan*, therefore, Christ as the new Patriarch, the new *Pangala Tondok*, has to take over the old community as His own and gives it new meaning. The community, then, has to put its life in order according to the ritual and customary laws (i.e. religion) of the new Patriarch. It has to transform its life and lift it to the level of a life patterned according to God's will. This transformation is a renewal of the meaning of life according to God's will in Jesus Christ. Renewal means to take over and at the same time to reject. *Tongkonan* community can be taken over, but its new criteria is Jesus Christ, the new Patriarch, who renews the *tongkonan* community. He invites all people to enter His *tongkonan*, but with an absolute condition: that His ritual laws to be followed—all that people need are in

Him. All aspects of life and therefore life in its wholeness is under His sole power.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Kobong regarded his ideas of transformation as “genuine contextualization”. For him, contextual theology (local theology) is the expression of a dynamic interaction between gospel, church and culture. He explained contextualization as a method of relating the text and the context as follows: Contextualization as a method is the dialectical interaction and communication between text and context.

Dialectical interaction and communication brings to the interpretation of the Gospel a context in the sense of culture and tradition where a transcultural Gospel defines and, at the same time, guarantees the genuine contextualization. Hermeneutic, as an effort to interpret and understand the Word contextually, can only guarantee genuine contextualization under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it requires a pneumatological base in the contextualization of every theology and church, and is, by the power of the Holy Spirit, breaking through all attachments to any static situation.

The authority of the Bible lies in its power to critique and judge, and, if necessary, break loose from the church. Genuine contextuality, therefore, is a result of a biblical and pneumatological hermeneutic (based on the Bible and lead by the Holy Spirit) on text and context. It should avoid nationalistic and cultural primordialism so as not to endanger the universalism of truth. Both the universal and the particular aspects should be included because truth is relational and creates relationships to every context.

The Gospel itself is above any particular culture, but also immersed in any culture but without being dissolved. It is the dialectic and dynamic of the culture that leads to cultural transformation. In the case of the Torajan culture it would mean that the Biblical text and Torajan culture enter a dialectic process where the Gospel transforms the Torajan culture.

Dr Kobong’s thoughts on contextualization and its application to the Christian community (the Church) as the new Torajan’s *Tongkonan* is a big step forward compared to limited vision of the GZB missionaries and older Torajan theologians. But the main criticism of his thought should be the criticism of its Niebuhrian model of one way transformation of the culture by the Gospel. There is no universal truth of the gospel to be imposed on the Torajan cultural system, values and expressions. The gospel itself was wrapped in a certain cultural context, and its content was substantiated by the life and history of the people in that historical context. The history and culture of the Torajan is not less than that

1 English translations of Dr. Kobong based on a draft translation in Indonesian of his dissertation in German, *Evangelium und Tongkonan*)

of the Hebrews or Jews. The truth of the gospel that emerged from the long Hebrew/Jewish history as recorded in the Bible should not be transferred to the Torajan, but should be the norm for Torajan cultural transformation. Dr Kobong, in fact, realized this option but he chose to develop a contextual ecclesiology with a very strong Christocentric approach whereby he imposed the Pauline messianism of the New Testament on the Torajan cultural system. His ecclesiology of the Torajan Tongkonan, therefore, is an expression of the gospel in the Torajan cultural expression without new and transformed Torajan values. The family kinship with all of its basic values, for example, was not given proper place in his Tongkonan ecclesiology. Figuratively speaking, he brought a Jewish Christ to the Torajan, but did not find the genuine Torajan Christ. Dr Kobong based his thought on his “master piece”—the Torajan Church Confession; a theological document he and some other theologians formulated to be the basic doctrinal reference for the Torajan Church. This heavily Christocentric theological formulation was considered as an answer to the need for a Torajan Christian identity. Dr Kobong did mention three fundamental aspects of the Torajan Church context, i.e. traditional culture, relation to Islam, and modernization. But he concentrated his study on Torajan traditional culture as mentioned above.

#### RELATION TO ISLAM

Islam emerged as major religion in South Sulawesi when, in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Sultan Alauddin, the King of Goa, Islamized other kingdoms by military force. Islam became a popular religion and mixed with old traditions. At the upper level it was institutionalized by an Islamic official in the court structure and legitimized by adopting Islam as the crown of the traditional custom system. The Torajan are the only one of the four major ethnic groups of South Sulawesi that were not Islamized. There were, indeed, some efforts from the side of the Islamic kingdoms to convert the Torajan by force so as to accomplish Sultan Alauddin’s dream. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the invasion by the Bone Kingdom to Islamize Toraja was resisted in a famous example of Torajan unity under the one vision and commitment of leaders “to uphold together the falling Bone mountain”. Some other campaigns to conquer Toraja political and religiously in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not succeed. Neither did the Islamic rebellion in the 1950s succeed. In short, there was strong resistance among the Torajan to Islam, especially as it came with a socio-political agenda, and a corresponding determination to keep the Toraja region as a strong Christian enclave. There were, however, a minority of Torajan who converted to Islam, and constitute a segment of Torajan society alongside the community of native Torajan religious.

The recent relationship of Torajan Christianity to Islam should be seen against that historical background, and in the context of socio-political changes regionally and nationally. There are two important developments which emerged in the last decade. First, social conflicts in some regions wrapped in ethnic and/or religious sentiments. Armed conflicts in Ambon, Halmahera and Poso emerged with a strong religious sentiment as Christian and Muslim wars took thousands of lives on both sides. Hundreds of Christian congregations did not survive as whole villages were killed or took flight to refugee camps. These conflicts had strong echoes in South Sulawesi where many Bugineese and Makassareese Muslims from South Sulawesi live in the conflict areas as migrants. A kind of emotional solidarity among Muslims in Makassar with their fellow Muslims or fellow Bugineese was at times expressed by harming Christians.

The second development is related to the first; that of a growing understanding of the value of peace and living peacefully. This awareness emerged from experiences of tragedy and suffering in the conflict areas. It was supported by religious teaching and traditional and national values of living in harmony. These factors motivated the religious and community leaders in Makassar to form a forum of community leaders to develop mutual understanding and promote peace and harmony among the different communities. One of the prominent figures in the forum, Mr. Jusuf Kalla, now a great figure in the presidential cabinet, was the leading figure behind two Malino conferences of Ambon and Poso on conflict resolution. The forum even managed to stage a successful national meeting of religious communities last January in Makassar. These two developments of conflict and of peace put Christians in Indonesia (including the Torajans) into two camps: being alert towards Muslims and holding hope for a peaceful future. The first camp gathered proof of the growing influence of radical groups with wide networks, even with international terrorists links, and from systematic programs to convert the nation into an Islamic state by applying Islamic laws (shari'a) to national life. The second camp put their faith in the national ideology of Pancasila and in the future harmony of Indonesian pluralistic society.

#### MIGRATION

For the Torajan, modernization came through education as the Dutch colonial rule reached its remotest regions almost a century ago. The basic schools opened by the colonial government were taken over by a Dutch Reform Christian mission that Christianized the region until Japanese military occupation in 1942. It was the education work of the mission that changed the Torajan from a backward ethnic group to one of the more advanced, compared to other ethnic groups with

longer histories under colonial power. The limited Toraja land for cultivation motivated the Torajan to migrate. Just like the other South Sulawesi ethnic groups, the Torajan are found almost everywhere in Indonesia working in urban informal sectors or on land newly opened for agriculture. Their migration helped the Torajan Church to spread far beyond Toraja land. Many of them went abroad to Malaysia as plantation or domestic workers. Another motivation was to get better education. Many Torajan youth are pursuing their future in the universities and live as urbanized people in the cities. A socio-cultural motivation behind these trends is a sense of responsibility for their parents' funeral rites. The Torajan are famous for their "funeral feast" where the clan house of the deceased do their best to put on as big as possible a feast for the funeral. Hundred of millions of rupiah are spent for the feast, where the main issue is the number of water buffaloes and pigs slaughtered. It even became a tourist attraction and was supported by the tourism industry and successfully developed next to Bali since the 1970's under the national program of Suharto's New Order. The funeral feast has developed a shift of motivation from traditional religious requirements to social prestige. As a Torajan becomes socially and economically successful, he/she will show off by means of his/her clan house funeral feast, or by erecting an expensive traditional house in his/her village. Alongside its economic aspects, the cultural tourism industry for the Torajan is a new opportunity to maintain and express their self-Identity.

But modernization has its dark side. Economic and social development among the Torajan is coupled with moral degradation. Gambling, crime, social fragmentation, leadership crises, infidelity and so on, are a cause for worry among many Torajan leaders. Strong Charismatic and Pentecostal movements among the Torajan Christians can be seen as a reaction to the situation.

#### SPIRIT OF PEACE

The spirit of tolerance and peace can be seen at least in some instances. There are some young Torajan theologians participating in interfaith dialogue groups and making significant contributions which represent a radical shift away from the exclusive doctrines of his/her tradition. Their influence is quite remarkable in that, at all levels of church meetings, the need to understand more of other faiths in the framework of mutual understanding has been put on the agenda. The social conflicts in some areas became an opportunity to organize interfaith conflict resolution. Experiences from these activities brought another important aspect to peace programs, i.e. growing concern for social justice as the meeting point of interfaith responsibility. The ongoing process of national socio-political reformation since the fall of the Suharto regime is a moment of



opportunity for the church to recapture her critical voice and concern for the needy. The negative impact of globalization opens the possibility for the church to carry out her prophetic mission.

Implementation of an Asian version of liberation theology has become a topic of discussion in theological seminaries and church meetings. The theological aspects of tolerance and peace, therefore, are grounded on the common concern for a national struggle for a better future. It is quite significant that a kind of “hermeneutic of peace” is emerging among different traditions as religions are exposed to the reality of social conflicts.

The cultural aspect of these trends are also important. The Torajan, as mentioned before, are very much concerned with their identity in terms of individual, clan-house and ethnic community. Past historical experiences taught them the importance of solidarity as formulated in the ethnic motto of “with one vision we will live, but with diverse visions we will perish”. This motto is revitalized in a wider context of region and nationalism as it parallels the national motto of “unity in diversity”. Together with the three other major ethnic groups in South Sulawesi, this solidarity is developed in an ancient principle of equality, “one on the top but the four are equal”. Its implementation should not only focus on fighting against negative sentiments of primordialism and discrimination, but can also be applied to common social responsibilities among religions, where the principle of interfaith solidarity should be motivated. Here culture and religion find a meeting place to deal with the social agenda.

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