

The Tradition of Visiting the Graveyard

A Theological Study on the Ways of Timorese Christians Honoring and Remembering the Dead

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Abstract— There is controversy among Christians about whether it is proper or not to visit the grave of a beloved one. First group regards that habit as idolatry while the second accepts it as a form of honoring and expressing love to those who were worthy with the exception of not talking to the dead. This article is for this question. Research was conducted among the local Church of Manutapen in Kupang. Living after death and honoring the dead in cultural and anthropological studies, and the Bible messages become the theoretical frame to discern this matter. There are three findings. *First*, Christians in Timor consider death is not the end of life. It is just an alteration of life in a new form. *Second*, death only separates body, but it is not obviate love. Visiting graves, putting flowers, lighting candles are expressions of love. Church should accept this as a means of proclamation of God's providence. *Third*, it's better for the church to provide a Christian framework to this habit in order to eliminate any elements of worshipping dead spirits.

Keywords: *Living after Death, Visit the Grave, Dead People, Spirit, Timor, Manutapen.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Approaching the religious holidays (Christmas, Eid Al-Fitr and New Year) Timorese stream to the graveyard. Members of a family meet at the grave of their beloved. They light candles and put flowers on the grave. Some of them bring food and have meals together after a short prayer. In some graveyards located in Manutapen sub-district, families sing hymns and recite a prayer before departing. It is an expression of honor and love to the late parents or siblings. Chanting religious songs and conducting communal prayer around the grave turns the atmosphere into a religious ritual.

Reactions toward this ritual are divided into two groups. The first half of them reacts negatively. Visiting the grave of a family member is considered as a form of worshipping the dead. The pilgrims are condemned to have defiled themselves and a cleansing ritual should be administered to them because they have gone astray from true faith.¹ The second half of them addresses this ritual more politely and in a mature way. It is perceived as a cultural element that should be respected. There are also some who try to incorporate this tradition into

¹ Albert Keo informed me this story in Christmas 2015. Leader of the prayer group refused to greet him before he was purified through prayer from defiled element because of visiting his parents' grave.

Christian liturgy. Such an effort is meant at one hand to obviate the element of worshipping dead and on the other hand to facilitate pilgrims to duplicate good life examples shown by the dead. Djidon de Haan puts it very nicely. "Watering the grave² is a tradition that should be preserved as a form of love to our deceased. I know that death is unavoidable but it only separates body. It could not disturb love because love was eternal. But, don't *boto-boto*."³

Some ministers have difficulties with this habit when they are asked: "Is it proper for Christians to visit the grave of their deceased?"⁴ This article deals with this problem. There are three purposes of this writing. *First*, to describe Christian view about human condition after death. The related question is whether death meant a total and definitive separation, so there exists no more memories, remembrance, and love to the dead? *Second*, to find out cultural and theological reasons that lay behind this tradition. A question to be answered is: what are the negative and positive values of this practice. *Third*, to search for patterns of incorporating this cultural practice into Christian worship. The guiding question is whether honoring, memorizing, and revealing love to the dead goes along with Bible witnesses and teaching? The theory of human existence in the moment of death and honoring the dead in cultural anthropology and biblical studies become the guide to this research.

II. METHODOLOGY

The research location is a local church called Pniel Manutapen, a Sub-district in Kupang. It was chosen for two reasons. *First*, in this sub-district there are three graveyards that are usually visited by family at Christmas and New Year and even on regular days. The visitors are mainly the church members. *Second*, Manutapen is a Christian sub-district. The population is 6.646. GMIT's church members are 6.557. Catholic Rome is 64 persons. There are only 25 Moslems.

² Watering the grave is a phrase in Kupang dialect that denoted to a ritual of visiting the grave bringing flowers to sow them on there.

³ Djidon de Haan. Interviewed in December 24th 2015. *Boto-boto* was a special phrase of Kupang people for a habit talking with low voice to state an intention. *Boto-boto* in the context of visiting the grave meant to deliver something to the dead such as asking for blessing, protection, or guidance to get something.

⁴ 14 priests discussed this topic with me during my field research.

There are no Hindu and Buddhists.⁵ There are six Church buildings: five belong to GMIT and one building is a Pentecostal Church. As far as the writer observed, all tombstones are built permanently using ceramic tiles. 70% of the tombstones are decorated with Christian symbols or biblical verses. Those who were interviewed came to sow flowers and light candles, including the owner of a grave decorated with Jesus' face or biblical verses. Methods of collecting data are interview,⁶ focused group discussion (FGD),⁷ direct observation,⁸ and documentation (secondary source).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Human Presence on the Death

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) stated that religions originally derived from cult of ancestor veneration [1]. Alex Jebadu in his study about *Practical Theology of Ancestral Veneration* mentioned that "Honoring the ancestors presupposed two things. *First*, belief that there is life after death. *Second*, belief of God's presence [1]. The first point exemplifies that human life does not disappear after death. People believed since the old times, that the soul of the deceased is still alive and cares about the living family members' life [2].

About human existence at the time of death, experts noted four opinions [3]. *First*, developing discontinuity between body and soul. Experience shows that body growth gets weaker along with the older age of a person, while the soul gets stronger. When death comes, there is *anima separate*, the separation of soul from the body. Death is only valid for body and not for the soul. The existence of the soul on the day a person died was hidden in God [4]. Unity of body and soul cannot be denied and is important, but it was not a *condition sine qua non* for the continuity of soul. This unity is also understood as it was planned to run forever.

Some anthropologists advocate this opinion. They says that death is only for the body while the soul is eternal. The human soul is not subject to death. When a man dies, the soul is still around the body. It will go to the ancestor world when it is accompanied with a certain ceremony [5]. Death happened when the body and soul got separated. This mortal body returns to the soil where it derived. Meanwhile the soul returns to God which from Him it came. Dayak Ngaju in Kalimantan views death as a gate for humans to enter a very glorious world, the world where their ancestors lived [6]. Belunese in Timor describes life as a moon: it rises in west, becomes a full moon and disappears gradually, but it is not gone. It will

appear again. Meanwhile Meto Ethnic in Timor thinks that the soul of the dead is hiding behind the wood and behind the rock (*hau bian fatu bian*). It is only the place and form of life that changed. The deceased doesn't vanish [7].

Humans do not die in the meaning of end, gone totally and definitively. By the time of death, the deceased does not disappear. He/she just moves to another place in this big cosmos. It is possible to communicate with the deceased once in a while through a special medium [8]. This opinion is considered against Bible witnesses because it exemplifies a dualism idea between body and soul. The bible does not support any doctrine of separation between body and soul of human. What the Bible said is that human was a body with soul or soul with a body. Body and soul refers to a complete human [9].

Second, sustainable and permanent continuity between body and soul. Death is the end of life. It happens for body and soul. The human has totally disappeared. Torajan Christians say: "*Human completely dies*" based on Genesis 2:7. [10]. Human is one totality: body and soul or spirit. Therefore body and soul are subject to death. According to Brinkman, permanent unity between body and soul is considered heretic throughout church history. We share the same view with Brinkman. God did not necessarily make two actions in the time of forming man: building a body from dust and breathing the breath of life into the nostril, if there is an eternal union between body and soul. These two separate actions showed that prior to becoming a living being the unity of body and soul did not yet exist. Unity of body and soul is important, but not permanent [11].

Third, positive continuity of unification between body and soul. If there is no body then there is no soul. Soul needs a place to stay. When the body dies, the soul seeks a new place to survive. God in his fidelity and generosity prepares a new home among the creation for the soul. This is the starting point for teaching reincarnation. *Fourth*, transformative continuity of the body-soul unity. This view is almost similar to the first opinion. If the first opinion just talks about gradual descent of body until it vanishes, the fourth opinion talks about the vanished body that will be transformed into a new great thing so that it deserves to be reunited with the soul in the time of resurrection. In other words, there is resurrection of the body. Death is a temporary interruption of the body-soul unity. In the new world the unity will occur again [12].

B. Honoring and Remembering the Deceased

Anthropological studies and experiences in various places and various eras show that the soul still exists after death. Those findings are supported by people who are in *near death experience*. The soul of the deceased expresses his concern toward the life of a member of his family [13]. Jebadu wrote: "Moving process from status as a family member to status as an ancestor does not cut someone's relationship with those who are still alive." Ayu Utami puts a rhetorical question: "If we can remember those who never lived as human, how about those who lived and passed away?[14] Remembering those who used to live becomes a frame of various forms of

⁵ Office of Manutapen Sub-district. Data in 2014.

⁶ The interviewee was 15 people.

⁷ FGD was held on December 30th 2015 from 8.00-11.00 pm at worship building of Pniel Manutapen. There were 165 participants while 21 persons actively joined the discussion. They stayed until FGD was closed. Participants acknowledged that it was interesting and enriching.

⁸ Observation was conducted in three graveyards in Manutapen for two weeks, between December 18th-30th 2015.

maintaining the relationship with the deceased conducted by those who are still alive.

The *first* form of perpetuating the memory for the deceased is by doing reminiscently (in the form of personal or group prayer) on certain days, such as the third, the 40th, the 100th day after death. Jebadu noted that for the Protestants, prayer for the dead is seldom conducted because of two reasons: 1). Protestants do not accept the concept of purgatory as a place to clean the deceased's soul based on prayers from the living family members. 2). The Protestants do not accept the roles of the holy persons as mediator between living people and God. These two points are exactly what the Roman Catholic do. Besides praying for the dead, prayers are also delivered to God through the dead. This last practice is commonly done at critical times.

The next way of perpetuating the memory of the deceased is visiting the grave on special events. The living family proceeds to the graveyard carrying flowers and lighting candles. The *third* form is by providing a small portion of a meal in a special location. This is commonly done in Africa. Savunese people in Timor still practice this habit [15]. The Savunese believe that the deceased are still present in the village and the house, participating in the daily activities of their descendants.

Grave maintenance forms another effort to remember, honor, and express love for the deceased. The ancient Egyptian noble family built giant graves for the deceased. They believed that a good and a proper funeral gave possibility for the dead to revive in another world. For Batak people, maintaining the memory of the ancestors is revealed by building huge monuments as storage for ancestors' bones and personal belongings.

Christian reaction toward these practices is separated into two groups. *The first* group highly refuses these habits. They are of the opinion that it is contradictory with the First and the Fourth Commandment. Meanwhile, the second group rejects the first group's opinion. They said that the ancestors are never treated as divine and therefore they are not worshipped but only memorized, loved and given respect. It is because the ancestors are historical signs of God's love that empower to live and to cure [16]. This group also confirms that beliefs which relate to the ancestors cannot be equalized with beliefs to the spirits of the world. The soul of the deceased is different from the spirits of the world. Ancestors bring us to worship God. They act as mediums to the Holy One because they are now closer to Him, meanwhile the spirits of the world seize human attention and persuade man to join in the rebellion against God. The ancestors' spirit becomes the guardian for the living in the name of God from the attack of spirits of the world. In this view, honoring the ancestors is part of Christian faith.

C. Israel the Bible Honored the Dead

The Bible provided witnesses about ways God's people honored and remembered the dead, especially those who had unforgettable roles. The Bible reported that Abraham bought a

piece of land in Makphela and buried Sarah there (Gen. 23). Later on, Abraham, Isak, Ribka, Lea and Jacob were also buried there (Gen. 49:31-32). The burial place is now visited by many people [17]. They don't worship those figures but learn from their faith and life examples. From that graveyard they recite prayer to God to help them live as good a life as those ancestors [18]. These pilgrimage places functions as a religious education place.

On the side of the road to Ephrata, Bethlehem, Jacob built a monument on Rachel's grave (Gen. 35: 20-21). Nowadays religious pilgrims visit that grave as part of their worship. When Jacob passed away, Joseph cried and kissed Jacob's face (Ex. 50:1), spent 40 days to spice the corpse (Gen. 50:3), mourned over Jacob's death for 70 days. They lamented again another seven days in Goren-Haataad (Gen. 50:10). When Joseph passed away, the Israelites made him a mummy (Gen. 50:26). Moses brought the mummy when he left Egypt (Ex. 13:19). The Israelites lamented for Moses' and Aaron's death for 30 days (Deut. 34:8; Num. 20:29). This tradition sets the background of the women who proceeded to Jesus's tomb early in the morning at the Easter day. There is no single word in the Bible against these practices. The prophets who inexhaustibly addressed severe critics against various forms of idolatry, social injustices, and transgressions of God's law did not make any judgments toward that practice.

Nevertheless, the Bible did not fully keep silent about this matter. In some places we encounter the prohibitions or judgments in relation to those practices. In Deuteronomy 18:11 we read that sorcerers, or people who asked the spirits or looked for guidance from the dead, are called as villain action for God. Leviticus 19:31 noted firmly God's prohibition to go to the spirits or soul of enchanters because God saw that as defile. Leviticus 20:27 mentioned if there were men or women in a trance, they must receive the death sentence, he or she will be thrown rocks and their blood befall over them. The last text is Isaiah 8:19. "When someone tells you: Consult the mediums and the spirit who whisper and mutter, then answered: should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" Those verses deal with *necromancy* a habit to communicate with the dead, call the spirits with various spells to get information, asking protection and luck from the dead [19]. The above texts absolutely state that guidance was asked from God only.

D. Devotion to the Dead in Christian Church

Devotion is referred to dedication or attitude that shows total respect and loyalty. This practice was shown not only to the living people who have big power, influence and charisma but also to those who had passed away, especially those who were the founders of a village, country, foundation or organization, and those with good quality of life that deserve to be role models. Devotion does not deal only in the political community. In the religious sphere, there are many dead people who deserve to be honored and immortalized.

Christians remember those figures in the following ways. *First*, naming the children, buildings or roads after the names of those who have passed away. My late mother's name was

Deborah. She told me that her grandparents expected her to be able to imitate Deborah's life and faith. My father is Trajanus, the name given by the priest as remembrance to the king Trajan who showed great sympathy for Christians during his reign. *Second*, drawing pictures of the saints at the walls or windows of the churches, saving the relics and making the grave of the saints to be religious pilgrimage destination. All these objects become media to visualize good examples and faith that they had exercised. *Third*, incorporating memory and respect to the dead in the worship. When Christians were persecuted, *katakombe* which used to be the burial place became the worship and the place for Holy Communion [2]. Domitila *katakombe* of the fourth century in Rome was the place where the bishops gathered for several weeks before the closing of the Vatican Council II to sign an agreement to fight for the poor that led to the birth of Theology of Liberation [20].

All these practices are not religious crimes but a means of teaching and proclaiming the Gospel. Christian witnesses about God's providence become vivid because of those means. The church will lose many learning medias to articulate their witness if these media are condemned. In my research people mentioned three benefits of these habits. *First*, it strengthens the kinship and fellowship ties in society and family. *Second*, it serves as a learning media for believers to live in God's providence. Up to this point, the majority of the respondents express their regrets because some ministers refuse to administer worship for 40 days, 100 days and one year after the day of the death. Ayu Utami said: "Point to be noticed from this activity is the encouragement received by the family who suffer the lost. Communal prayer, held seven days in a row, would be very helpful to alleviate the deserted feeling for those who are left behind. *Third*, it creates desecration of the graveyard. The graveyard is no longer seen as a horrifying and haunted place but a proper place to spread God's words. Incorporating these habits into Christian worship is an effort that should be addressed positively. Certainly, it should be accompanied with Church pastoral work to criticize the habit from necromancy elements.

E. Momentum of Remembering Love, and Goodness

I will start this section by citing in full the following statement:

I didn't wait for Christmas or New Year to visit the grave. Every time I return to my hometown I go there. I do that because I remember my grandmother from my father's side. I never knew her directly. I only heard about her from my father. There were positive stories but also negative ones. For me, it became a sign. We duplicated the good and threw away the bad as we did for my grandparents in Manutapen. Sometimes, from Sikumana we went to see their grave then continued to the house just to remember their love. I agreed to keep the tradition of visiting the grave. It became the church task to remind their members about the motivation to visit the family's grave.⁹

⁹ Oce Seo (32). Interviewed in December 23th 2015.

Most FGD participants agreed with the statement. They said that their motivation was the respect and memory of love and goodness shown by the dead. "Mother passed away 10 years ago, but I will never forget her love, sacrifice, and kindness. Because of her, I grew up and became what I am now. Mother also brought me to Jesus and taught me to live according to His teaching."¹⁰

Visiting the grave was the momentum to remember exemplary and good values of the dead, who inherit in us all the good things. It was a sweet memory. Ramly Kusumo was angered by those who regard the habit as idolatry. "Visiting the grave should not be seen as worshipping idols, because that was not the intention of these people. They just went there because to remember their beloved ones."¹¹

It is senseless to visit the grave without the commitment to duplicate the goodness and faith shown by the dead. Mr. Matheos Bengu never visited his parents' grave since he moved to Kupang after high school in Ende. What he did was named his children after his late parents'. He always thinks of their advice when running his life and passes on their advice to his children.¹² Yupiter Biaf placed pictures of his late parents in his living room and lives a good life as the way to remember and honor his parents.¹³

Building graves with cement and ceramics and then putting religious pictures and biblical verses on the tomb are neither negative nor paganism. If those actions are practiced to please the dead's soul, expect blessings and other favorable regard, then it is a mistake. "The dead do not need flowers, marble tombstone and an offering in the form of food. If we placed a picture of Jesus and a cross on the grave, it was only to send a message for the passing people that the deceased was a Christian."¹⁴

The Protestant church in Timor refuses to pray for the deceased when they visit the grave. Prayer is a spiritual talk with God not to the deceased nor with humans. Living people can pray and needed to be prayed for. The dead could no longer pray and do not need prayer. This position is reversed with the Catholic Rome. It is not illegitimate to pray for the soul of the dead. Roman church has a specific prayer day for the dead every first November. A Catholic novelist said: "Prayer was not a law. It was love and beauty. We prayed for the souls not because we would get punished if we didn't do it, or because the dead would be angry. We prayed because we loved them. We wanted to offer something, but we knew that they would not need material things anymore, so we offered a spiritual thing: prayer."

F. Living in a New Form in Another World

Death puts the end to a life episode, but it does not destroy the memories and love of those who have passed away. Good examples and teaching shown by the dead remained in the

¹⁰ Sergia P. Keo Nubatonis (56). Manutapen – FGD participant.

¹¹ Ramly Kusumo (38). Manutapen – FGD participant.

¹² Matheos Bengu (67). Manutapen – FGD participant.

¹³ Yupiter Biaf (62). Manutapen – FGD participant.

¹⁴ Asyer Rihi Tugu (51). Manutapen – FGD participant.

heart of those who were left behind. According to the Christians in Timor, death is not the end of life but it is an alteration into a new life mode for the new world. The dead has transformed into a smooth form, a self without physical form. The dead become spiritual creatures and stay in the spirit world. Christians in Timor think that death is included in developed discontinuity theory and transformative continuity as it has been shown through the above theories.

In Timorese view, the spirit world where the dead lives is located close to the physical world. The spirit world is in another side of the visible world. That world is *hau bian ma fatu bian* (behind the wood and behind the rock).¹⁵ Occupants of that could not communicate with the living in orthodox form. Communication is through dreams or exchanging ideas through the mind. Yupiter Biaf told a story about his parents who were buried separately with 300kms distance. Their children was always distracted, they regularly got sick. Some of his siblings dreamed of meeting their late father and mother. The children were asked to bring their father's bones to their mother's grave. These children did not care about it at first, but the same dream kept recurring. They then decided to fulfil the demand. After that, they no longer felt sick and the dream ceased.¹⁶

The dead no longer have a physical body. We are unable to see them. Nevertheless, they see us, listen to our conversation, and react to requests. Albert Keo's aunt passed away and was buried in a graveyard beside her husband and her youngest son. Her first born is in Papua. When he was on vacation in 2010 he visited his parents' graves. The grave was located by an eroded cliff. He decided to move their bones to a better place. The digging started after getting agreement from the family. The digging of the first two graves ran well. When they dug their mother's grave, the soil hardened like rock. The crowbar could not dig a hole. In panic, his brother thought of Albert. They did not include Keo, the family of their mother. For Timorese, when a woman passed away, the persons who had the right to close the coffin were her brother or her brother's son. Then they hurriedly called a Keo family member to come to the grave. After praying, he took a crowbar and started digging. A miracle happened. The soil that was as hard as rock started to soften as a sponge.¹⁷

In intangible form, the dead see and hear us. When we state our ideas, talk or communicate with them, they understand and react. This reaction is detected through the changing of their corpse. Oma (Grandmother) Benggu's daughter got married with Oma Baliare's son. It was in 2000. Two weeks after the wedding, the husband went to Jakarta for work. In Jakarta, he heard that his wife was pregnant. The husband divorced his wife and accused her of having affair behind his back. Oma Benggu was angry. Explanation through phone calls could not alter the matter. In anger, Oma Benggu

swore that she would no longer have any kind of business with all Baliare family. "When I die none of Baliare are allowed to come to visit. I would ruin my dead body so that it would give off a foul odor when a Baliare members come." All family members heard that curse.

Eleven years later Oma Benggu passed away. Approaching to the funeral, Oma Baliare intended to come to the house to mourn. The family who gathered around the dead body were surprised because of a foul smelling odor. It was not only in the surrounding, but it also spread along the village. This foul odor reminded the children of their mother's curse. Finally, they found out that Oma Baliare was on her way (3kms distance) to Oma Benggu's house. One of the family members then went about 100m away from the house to stop Oma Baliare from her intention to visit. And the foul smelling odor then disappeared after Oma Benggu turned around and returned to her house.¹⁸

The dead is living in a new way. Their new world is very close with the place where we live. In the new mode of life in his/her world, the dead can be talked to, notice the way the family treats him/her, listen to the conversation of the family, and react to that treatment.

G. Refusing Necromancy

The dead still exist. They care about what happens in the family and are ready for some actions. We believe that because God Himself prohibits us to ask for guidance from the dead or to put requests to the spirit. Timorese Christians don't deny this common view. Necromancy practices that include the tradition of visiting the grave stems from this belief. Oral literature of the Timorese reports many folklores about necromancy [21].

Necromancy is not allowed for Christians. "In my place, people are prohibited from visiting the grave because of supernatural experience that goes along with it. For example: a child got sick so the father went to the grave, to water it, admit to sins and to pray for recovery. I personally agree with that prohibition. But not all actions when visiting the grave should be accused. What God saw as atrocity is putting request and asking for guidance from the dead." In his Facebook account dated December 24, 2015, accessed on December 26, 2015, Djidon de Haan expressed similar thought. He put some family pictures at his parents' grave. Under those photos he wrote: "Visiting the grave on the Holy days is a cultural tradition that should be maintained because it reminded the family about love. Talking to the spirit was a sin, but visiting the grave of our beloved was a sign of love."¹⁹

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Respecting and remembering the dead who we love because of their goodness, love, good examples, are good when viewed from a social perspective, anthropologically and culturally, even religiously. Death does not stop our father and

¹⁵ According to native Christians in Asia and Africa, spirits of the dead commonly stays around in their grave, in the valleys or mountain peaks and houses of the living family members.

¹⁶ Yupiter Biaf (62), Manutapen, FGD participant.

¹⁷ Albert Keo (68). Interviewed on December 25, 2015.

¹⁸ Ad Dohina (66). Interviewed on January 5, 2016.

¹⁹ Djidon de Haan (68). Facebook account dated December 24, 2015.

mother from being our parents. Memories, remembrance, honor, and love for them does not automatically disappear. There are many ways to express our honor and love for them. Christians may visit and clean the graves, place flowers to reveal honor and love to those who have passed away. Things that should be avoided are; communicating with the dead, asking for blessings and requesting to be prayed.

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