

# The *Kélah* Ritual of The Manggaraians in Flores-Eastern Indonesia and Its Theological Significance For Roman Catholics

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## Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the theological significance of the traditional religious practice of the Manggaraians in Flores, eastern Indonesia called the *Kélah* Ritual. It is an aspect of the traditional religion of the Manggaraians. The authorities of the Catholic Church in Manggarai have been very tolerant toward the ritual and provide enough space for the Catholics to practice it. The Church, however, does not have a sufficient understanding of its theological significance due to insufficient previous studies on the subject. This paper demonstrates that the ritual has a deep theological significance. This study employed direct observation, direct participation in the *Kélah* Ritual in several places in Manggarai, focus group discussions, key informant interviews and questionnaires. The results of this research indicate that this ritual is a rite of passage about the human soul departing from this world to heaven conducted a few days or months after the body's interment. It was on the day of the soul's ascension to heaven where all of the family ancestors meet with God eternally. This research concludes that, with its theological meaning, the ritual conforms with the Catholic faith doctrine regarding the gradual departure of the human soul to heaven after its corporal death – purgatory. No soul goes right away to heaven when it is not 100% holy. The ritual, therefore, could be valued and officially incorporated into the Catholic faith tradition in order to enrich its worship to God.

**Keywords:** *kélah* ritual, traditional religion, human soul, Catholic Church

### **Abstrak**

*Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan makna teologis praktik keagamaan tradisional masyarakat Manggarai di Keuskupan Ruteng, Flores, Indonesia bagian timur yang disebut Ritual Kélah. Ritual ini merupakan satu aspek dari agama tradisional orang Manggarai. Para pemimpin Gereja Katolik setempat sangat toleran terhadap ritual ini dan memberikan ruang yang luas bagi umat untuk mempraktikkannya. Akan tetapi Gereja Katolik di Keuskupan Reuteng tidak memiliki pemahaman yang cukup baik tentang signifikansi dari ritual ini karena studi-studi sebelumnya tentang ritual ini tidak memadai. Penelitian ini sebaliknya menunjukkan bahwa ritual kélah ini memiliki makna yang penting. Penelitian ini menggunakan observasi langsung, partisipasi langsung dalam Ritual Kélah di Manggarai, diskusi kelompok terfokus, wawancara informan kunci dan kuesioner. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ritual ini merupakan ritual keberangkatan jiwa manusia dari dunia ini ke surga yang diyakini dimulai beberapa hari atau bulan setelah jenazah dimakamkan. Ritual ini mengiringi hari kenaikan jiwa ke surga di mana semua leluhur keluarga diyakini telah bersama dengan Allah selama-lamanya. Sehingga disimpulkan, ritual ini ternyata sejalan ajaran Katolik tentang keberangkatan jiwa manusia yang perlahan-lahan ke surga setelah kematian badan – api penyucian. Tidak ada jiwa manusia yang langsung masuk surga jika selama hidup di dunia orang tidak 100% suci. Dengan demikian, mesti dihargai dan secara resmi dirangkulkan ke dalam tradisi iman Katolik untuk memperkaya ibadahnya kepada Allah.*

**Kata kunci:** ritual kélah, agama tradisional, jiwa manusia, Gereja Katolik

### **Introduction**

This article is based on a study about the *Kélah* Ritual by the Manggaraians in Flores, Eastern Indonesia. Like any other ethnic group of the island, the Manggaraians are predominantly Catholic in a country of 250 million inhabitants. Manggarai is located in the territory of the Diocese of Ruteng, where 96.36% of its total population of 821.089 are Catholics (Haryanto, 2020:21; cfr. Kementerian Agama Kantor Wilayah Provinsi NTT 2013). Catholic faith was embraced for the first time by the Manggaraians in 1912.

Although the majority of Manggaraians today are Catholics, their customs and several elements of their so-called traditional religion is still maintained and practiced side by side with the practice of their Catholic faith. One element of their traditional religion that is still cherished and widely practiced today is the *kélah* ritual. As per authors' observation, there was almost no death of any member of the community in Manggarai for which a *kélah* ritual was not performed. When *kélah* ritual is not performed, the soul of the dead person is believed to be far from reaching its final destination. Performing the overdue ritual will remain as a duty of the surviving members of the family. They should remember it and vow to, sooner or later, do it.

*Kélah* ritual is held almost every year given that there is death/s occur in every year in a rural community in Ruteng. In line with the general policy of the worldwide Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council that respects the good and sacred values of other cultures and religions (Nostra Aetate, 1965:art.2; cfr. Gaudium et Spes, 1965:art.58; Ad Gentes, 1965:art.34; Paul VI,1975:art.20; Paul II,1990:art.5; Jerman, 2005:130), the authority of the Catholic Church of Ruteng Diocese does not prohibit people of Catholic faith from holding their traditional religious ritual as long as its values are still in line with the values of the Catholic faith.

The only thing that the Catholic Church has not done is legally approving the practice. When asked about the nature of this ritual, the authorities of the Catholic Diocese of Ruteng, either its pastors or its bishop, would not be able to describe it comprehensively. They find it difficult to give an account as to why they have not legally approved it and why they do not prohibit it either. The main reason for this response is that the Catholic theologians and scholars of the Ruteng

Diocese have not conducted a research study on this particular traditional religious ritual. Due to the absence of Church official approval to include the rituals into worships, *kélah* ritual and the Catholic Holy Mass are celebrated separately for the same religious event. Normally, *kélah* ritual is conducted first, in its own way, and then soon after it is followed by the celebration of the Catholic Holy Mass. Both rituals are meant for the safe journey of the departing soul on that very day.

In terms of financial cost, the *kélah* celebration can be categorized as costly. It draws large groups of people such as residents of the entire village where *kélah* ritual is held. Groups families called *anakrona* (the wife-givers) and *anakwina* (the wife-receivers or wife-takers), including those living in distance, must attend the celebration. They must be willing to sacrifice their time, energy, money, and their day job for two to three days for this ritual.

From these facts, it can be drawn two major of problems that need to be addressed in this study. First, although the Catholic Church in Ruteng Dioces in Flores, Eastern Indonesia has been very tolerant toward the ritual of *kélah*, they might not be well-informed about the theological significance of the ritual for the traditional Manggaraians. Second, although Manggaraians cherish and practice the ritual, some of them may not have a good understanding of it due to the fact that this ritual is inherited from one generation to another without discussing its important nature.

Based on these two aforementioned main problems, the objective of this paper is to discuss the theological significance of *kélah* ritual by the Manggaraians. *Kélah* is a rite of passage of the human soul departing from this world to heaven, conducted a few days or months

after the body's interment. The principle of this ritual is quite similar with the Catholic faith doctrine regarding the gradual departure of the human soul to Heaven after its corporal death (so called purgatory). Rationally, this ritual can be officially incorporated into the church tradition and worship as dreamed by the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council in 1964: "Anything in people's way of life which is not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error, the Church studies with sympathy, and, if possible, preserves intact. It [the Church] sometimes admits such things [human cultures and the sacred values of other religions] into the liturgy itself, provided they harmonize with its true authentic spirit" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1964: art.37; cfr. Mercado, 1992:133; Zoa, 1991:277-278).

In doing so, the local Catholic Church in the Diocese of Ruteng, Flores, implements the call of the Universal Church that it should bring into dialogue with the world in which she exists and labors (Paul VI, 1964: art.65; cfr. Paul II, 1979: art.11; Gioia, 2006:72 ). In fact, this move is also in line with the teachings of Pope John Paul II. In *Ecclesia in Asia*, a document written as part of preparations for the celebration of the blessed year 2000, Paul II (1999: art.6, 20-22) says that respecting and embracing sacred values in other religions and the cultures of peoples is one of the dreams of the Catholic Church which is based on the love of Jesus Christ that embraces all peoples and cultures. This is true especially when human cultures and religious traditions are in themselves not evil things. Such human cultures and religious traditions are to be conserved and protected (Gallagher, 2003: 116-117, cfr. Fox, 2002: 133; (Bevans, 2004: 385-388), including *kélah* cherished by the Manggaraians in Flores, Eastern Indonesia up to this day.

## **Method**

This study was mainly conducted through a fieldwork and literature studies pertinent to the research subject. The researcher was involved in direct observation and participation in *kélah* ritual in 2019. This study was conducted in three churches, namely St. Mark Parish of Rego, Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish of Golowelu, and St. Joseph Freinademetz Parish of Wajur – all in the Catholic Diocese of Ruteng. In these selected parishes, data was collected through focus group discussions (FGD), interviews with key informants, and direct participation in *kélah* rituals. Additional data was also collected through questionnaires filled out by one hundred villagers in each of the three parishes selected.

## **Literature Review**

In many traditional religions, rituals that are similar to *kélah* are commonly found among various ethnic groups, either in Flores, in ethnic groups of Indonesia, or among the indigenous people in other parts of the world. Even though the ritual is performed in different ways, its main purpose remains the same. It is based on a religious belief that the soul of a deceased person does not immediately go to its eternal residence in the afterlife. Instead, it departs slowly up to a point where the living family members let it go for good through a ritual, so called by the Manggaraians as *kélah*.

Similar to Manggaraians, indigenous Australians, for instance, believe that when a person dies, the soul leaves the body in which it resided and once the mourning period is over it goes to the land of the souls (Durkheim, 1995: 249-250). It means that from the day of the body burial, the soul still temporarily lingers with the surviving family. When a farewell ritual is conducted at the end of the mourning period,

the soul starts departing to its final destiny – the land of the souls, or Heaven in the view of modern religion.

In Indonesia, many Muslims still practice a *tahlilan*, a series of prayers adopted from an old Javanese traditional religion, offered on the third, seventh, one hundredth and one thousandth day for the soul after the interment of its body. (Geertz, 1960:72). According to Machasin, this religious practice should be preserved even though the practice is not based on the Qur'an or any Hadith (2017:216). This indicates that some Javanese Muslims also believe that the souls of the newly deceased do not immediately ascend from the world of the living and quickly arrive in the eternal life. The souls, on the other hand, still linger with their surviving families for a certain period of time and are in need of their supporting prayers for the soul's final destiny in heaven.

Verheijen (1991) who has dedicated his life in observing this ritual, noted that few days upon someone's death, the surviving family members are not allowed to conduct their regular activities (e.g. going to farm, playing any music instrument, visiting their garden, etc.). *Kélah* can only be taken place where both families of wife-givers and wife-receivers attend the ceremony; thus this ritual is usually postpone until a suitable time for everyone (Verheijen, 1991: 213). Following Verheijen, Maribeth Erb (1999) also observed that until a *kélah* ritual is held, the soul of the deceased were still around and so their sleeping and eating spots are treated similarly as if they were still alive. During the mealtime, meal is placed on the spot where the deceased used to eat; a cloth is placed on the spot where he/she used to sleep. The ritual is concluded by an animal sacrisfaction (Erb, 1999:50).

The most recent study on *kélah* ritual published in *Studia Islamika* by Yohanes Lon and Fransiska Widyawati, define *kélas*, the word for the *kélah* ritual in the local language of the Manggaraians, as death commemoration (Lon, 2019:456). Here, the authors mention a pig sacrificed at the occasion of the *kélah* as *elakélas*. The pig is sacrificed as part of the prayer to say the final goodbye for the soul of the deceased person that starts its departure for heaven on that very day. Therefore, it is not sacrificed for a commemoration for the dead.

While *kélah* is presented very briefly, the discussion of Verhejijen and Erb, and Lon and Widyastuti on this ritual are not sufficient since due to the main subject of their studies. (Catatan copy editor: kalimat 'since due to the main subject of their studies' tidak serasi dengan kalimat sebelumnya yang menyatakan 'the discussion.... On this ritual are not sufficient.' Saran: rephrase to clarify) In these previous studies, *kélah* was simply seen as a social and cultural phenomenon. *Kélah* ritual, in fact, means much more than a social or cultural phenomenon for Manggaraians. *Kélah* ritual is an aspect of the traditional religion of the Manggaraians with deep theological significance both for the departing soul of the dead person and for the surviving family members left behind. The present study is therefore aimed to fill this gap in the literature.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **The Process of the *Kélah* Ritual**

#### ***a) The Vigil of the *Kélah* Ritual***

Before *kélah* ritual is conducted in the morning, all guests, especially the entourage of relatives of the family of wife-givers and of wife-receivers are expected to arrive in the evening. They are warmly

welcomed by the host and have dinner together. This welcoming ceremony and dinner usually last until 10.00 p.m.

### ***The Ting Ghang Ritual***

At around 07.00 p.m. the event begins with a ritual of *ting ghang* and *ngereng weki*. In the ritual of *ting ghang*, the soul of the deceased is called to symbolically eat together with all of the surviving family members and all who are present for the last time. At a *haungta'a* ritual conducted to delay a *kélah* ritual, the soul of the deceased is told to leave his/her living family for a while, and he is promised to be called back when *kélah* ritual is to be held later.

If followed carefully, this ceremony is very moving. The soul of the deceased person, who is being invited to sit and eat together with his/her surviving family that night, is provided an empty pillow. He/she is symbolically welcomed to sit on it to indicate that he/she is indeed present and is willing to stay with the surviving family for the last time before he/she heads to the afterlife in the morning as *kélah* ritual is conducted.

### ***The Ritual of Ngereng Weki***

*Ngereng weki* is a ritual meant to ask for God's protection for all the surviving family and relatives, both who are present and not present. They are all expected not to fall into any temptation that endangers their body and soul. *Ngereng wiki* is conducted prior to *kélah* where a number of animals will be sacrificed, such as two roosters and two pigs or a buffalo. One rooster and one pig are sacrificed for the soul of the dead, while another rooster and

pig are offered as a symbolic prayer for the wellbeing of all the surviving family members.

As commonly practiced in the world religions, animals are sacrificed to replace human beings in order to make peace with God. In every religious ritual of sacrifice, humans are supposed to be sacrificed to God, as mentioned in the Old Testament Bible. God demanded Abraham to offer his only son Isaac, but later Isaac was replaced by a lamb (cfr. Gen.22:1-19). The Manggaraians, according to their traditional religion, also have the same belief. God accepts the sacrifice of animals offered as a substitute for human sacrifice. Based on this traditional religious belief, then, on the night before *kélah* ritual, the surviving family members make a petition to God that only animals will be sacrificed, not the surviving human lives.

***b) On the Day of the Kélah Ritual***

The ceremony of *kélah* always takes place in the morning around 7.00 a.m. Even though the soul of the deceased can leave the world for heaven any time, either in the morning, at noon, in the evening or at night, the Manggaraians still use their natural human sense. In their view, it is better for the soul of the deceased to start his/her long journey to heaven in the morning instead of any other times. *Kélah* itself consists of three main parts. First, *langsung jerék*, a set of prayers offered by everyone who is left by the deceased, namely: the surviving family members, village residents, the wife-givers and the wife-takers. Their prayers are requested by the ritual leader and are united in the main prayer of the *kélah* ritual. The second part is *tudak kélah*, which is the main prayer and the peak of the *kélah* ritual. Lastly, *tudak pangga*, a special prayer is offered by the family groups of wife-givers

for the wellbeing of all the surviving family members of the deceased person.

### ***The Tudak Kélah Ritual***

After the prayer offering from all parties, the ritual leader continues with the most important part of the ritual, namely reciting the prayer for the sacrificed animals in order to deliver and permit the soul of the deceased to immediately start his/her long journey to heaven. He opens the prayer by telling all parties present: "Now we have arrived at the peak of our ritual. Since you support heartily this ritual with your prayers, let us now proceed to the most solemn part of our program, namely, the prayer of the *kélah* ritual."

In and through the prayer of *Tudak Kélah* Ritual, the soul of the deceased is believed to start heading for heaven. S/he is now a part of the family of the ancestors gathering with God. Later on, the ceremony is followed by *tudak pangga* provided by the family groups of wife-givers to pray for the wellbeing of the surviving family members. Whenever there is a Catholic Pastor, the ritual is consummated by celebrating the Sacred Holy Mass in which the pastor also prays for the safe journey of the deceased soul off to heaven, and the wellbeing of the surviving family who are still in this world.

### **The Meaning of the *Kélah* Ritual**

What is the meaning of the *kélah* ritual for the Manggaraians or of the similar ritual for other ethnic groups of the world religions? For Manggaraians, the meaning of *kélah* can be detected through the inquiry of various terms or phrases used to describe the ritual such as:

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1) *kélah* (farewell, to separate), 2) *pekedì'a* (to repair, to fix, to correct), 3) *pedéng bokong* (to provide life provision), 4) *halé mai waé ghau sé mai waé ghami* (you go your way and we go our way), 5) *ténté watu pésék pandé mbaru baté ka'éng, rojo niang mongko pandé mbaru baté ka'éng* (to build a new residence), 6) *ting lose weru* (to give a new 'bedroom') and 7) *jiri seki ghia ga agu nganséng jiri létang laéng kamping Murin* (becoming ancestor and mediator between the living and God). Each of these terms are described as follows.

First, the term *kélah*. According to Verheijen, the word *kélah* in the language spoken by the Manggaraians means 'separation' (noun) or 'to separate' (verb). Consequently, the word *kélah* can be used to describe any separation in general (Verheijen, 1991:199). In fact, this word is exclusively used to express a final separation or an ultimate farewell between the soul of the deceased person and his/her surviving family members.

Second, the phrase *pekedì'a*. In the language of the Manggaraians, the word *pekedì'a* means 'repair' (noun) or 'to repair' (verb). It is to repair something that is damaged or broken, or to correct something that is wrong, or to straighten up something that is crooked. For Manggaraians, ritual of *kélah* is meant to clean all the weaknesses that have been committed by the deceased person during his/her life time in the world. Before his/her soul leaves the mundane world for the last time, the surviving family members are obliged to repair the damaged relationship, to correct all his/her wrong doings, to straighten up all his/her crooked acts of the past. Using the language of Christianity, in this ultimate farewell the surviving family members have a loving duty to beg God's mercy for all his/her sins so that his/her soul may be welcomed without any hindrance in heaven.

Third, the phrase *pedéng bokong*. The word *pedéng* in the language of the Manggaraians means ‘a gift’ (noun) or ‘to give’ (verb) and ‘*bokong*’ means provisions. Based on the literal meaning of these words, the phrase *pedéng bokong* means to provide provisions. At the *kélah* ritual, the departing soul is being given ultimate provisions by the surviving family members for his/her safe journey to heaven. What and how much provisions should be given, this can vary. The first possibility is that these provisions are in the forms of good wishes and various prayers for God’s forgiveness for all sins of the deceased person committed while roaming this mundane life.

Other provisions are in the form of economic and social rights for the welfare of eternal life of the deceased person in heaven. Like the traditional society in general, the Manggaraians imagine new life in the afterlife more or less like earthly life. In Heaven, the souls of the living dead are still in need of some kind of economic and social rights such as fire to cook food, water to drink, a yard to have communal play, a place of worship and a garden to work. It is imagined that, just as the living in the world need these five socio-economic sectors to live in prosperity, the souls in the afterlife also need some kind of socio-economic sources in order to live in prosperity. That is the reason that on the day of the *kélah* ritual, fire, water, clothing, animals sacrificed and various other things are symbolically given to the departing soul.

Fourth, the phrase *halé mai waé ghau sé mai waé ghami*. This phrase is one of the most frequent parts of the prayer chanted on the *kélah* ritual. Literally, *hale mai* means ‘on the other side’ and usually westward, *wae* means ‘river’, *ghau* means ‘you’, *sé mai* means ‘the side over here’ and *ghami* means ‘we’. Based on this literal meaning, the phrase *halé mai waé ghau sé mai waé ghami* means that from the

moment at which *the kélah ritual* is conducted, the surviving family members and the departing soul begin to live separately in two different worlds. It is like two groups of people whose lives are separated by a large river and cannot cross over the other side. The expression of this traditional prayer symbolizes a definitive separation between the departing soul that ascends into heaven and all his/her surviving family members who still need to continue their lives in the world.

Fifth, the phrase *ténté watu pésék pandem baru bate kaéng rojo niang mongko pandé mbaru bate ka'éng*. Literally, *ténté* means 'to stick something into the ground', *watu* means 'stone', *pésék* means 'flat', *pandé* means 'to build', *mbaru* means 'a house', *bate ka'éng* means 'a place to live', *rojo* means 'to weave' and *niang mongko* means 'a traditional ancestral home of the Manggaraians which looks like a pyramid'. The phrase *ténté watu pésék pandé mbaru bate kaéng rojo niang mongko pandé mbaru bate ka'éng* means that the *kélah* is an endeavor of the surviving family members to ensure heaven for their departing soul. They set up this home in heaven for the departing soul through their prayers so that s/he could be warmly welcomed by God in heaven.

Sixth, the phrase *tinglose weru*. Literally, *ting* means 'to give', *losé* means 'a mat or a bedroom', and *weru* means 'new'. *Kélah* as a *ting lose weru* means that through a series of rituals, the departing soul is symbolically given by God 'a new bedroom' or 'a new residence' in heaven. The surviving family members have to intercede for the departing soul. Starting on the day of *kélah* ceremony, the departing soul no longer shares a bedroom or home with his/her surviving family members in the world. Instead, s/he starts to share a new home with the

ancestors in heaven. For this reason, all members of the surviving family are all invited for the occasion to pray that God may be pleased to give the soul of their loved one a new eternal home in heaven.

Seventh, the expression of *jiri seki ghia ga agu nganséng jiri létang laeng kamping Murin*. Literally, *jiri* means ‘to become’, *seki* means ‘the soul of the dead is believed to be with souls of the ancestors and with God in heaven’, *ghia* means ‘s/he’, *agu* means ‘and’, *nganséng* means ‘to be able to’, *létang* means ‘a bridge or intermediary’, *laéng* means ‘to become’, *kamping* means ‘towards’, and *Murin* means ‘God’ as the Absolute Owner of life. This expression implies that the departing soul is believed to have officially been a member of another community in another world. The souls of other living dead – the ancestors – can play a role as an intermediary between his/her surviving family members who are still in the world and the Almighty God. His/her surviving family in the world can invoke God’s various blessings through her/his prayer intercession in heaven. Consequently, when a ritual of *kélah* has not been conducted for a deceased soul, s/he cannot yet become an intermediary between his/her surviving family members in the world and God in heaven.

The last phrase later becomes a critical note for the contemporary Manggaraians who tend to postpone the ceremony of the *kélah* ritual for years. If the Manggaraians are consistent with their traditional religious belief system that *kélah* is essential to deliver the soul of the deceased to heaven, this ritual should not be postponed for years. Rather, it should have been conducted as soon as possible for the family members. In the old days, the main reason for postponement of the ritual was bad weather. If a person dies during the rainy season, the surviving family cannot conduct the *kélah* ritual right away at that

time. Another question as to whether the departure of the soul to the afterlife will also be delayed for years because of the postponement of *kélah* ceremony, prevails.

### **3. The Timing of the *Kélah* Ritual**

Manggaraians believe that the soul of a deceased person still lingers with his/her surviving family up to the third, fourth, fifth or eighth day after the burial of the body. This belief varies from one region to another. In one region, people conduct the *kélah* on the third day, others do it on the fourth day, on the fifth day or on the eighth day. This time division is made according to what is called the *seki* (life cycle) of each region. There are *seki telu* (life cycle three), *seki pat* (life cycle four), *seki lima* (life cycle five) and *seki alo* (life cycle eight). It is also important to note that all processes occur at death must parallel the processes that occur at birth. There are *seki mata* (life cycle of death) that must parallel with *seki loah* (life cycle of birth).

According to the traditional religious belief system of the Manggaraians, a baby is not automatically counted as a member of the living family. From the day of his/her birth until a few days afterward, the baby and the mother are secluded inside the house. They stay in the hearth called *sumpéng* (the fire of confinement) for several days according to the kind of *seki* practiced by the clan family (Erb, 1999:39). The Manggaraians where an author is from (Jebadu) practice *seki alo* (life cycle eight). The newborn baby and the mother are secluded inside a house near a *sumpéng* for eight days and nights. During the stay in the *sumpéng*, the baby along with his/her soul is not considered a part of the world of the living, rather it still belongs to the previous eternal world that belongs to God.

On the eighth day, *sumpéng* is torn apart, and the baby for the first time is taken out of the house and his/her presence is announced to all family members of his/her clan. On the occasion of this ceremony called *séar sumpéng*, all people in the entire village, relatives of the family of wife-givers and of wife-takers are all invited to welcome the baby to the world of the living. They set up a great celebration of *sear sumpéng* for the baby. If the parents of the baby are not ready to do the ritual, it can be postponed for a later time.

For Manggaraians, during the time of death, the process of transitioning human life also follows exactly the same stages of transitioning life at time of birth as an event of entering the world. For those who hold *seki alo* (life cycle eight), during the first eight days after the burial of the body, it is believed that the soul still roams around. S/he still invisibly stays with his/her surviving family and is still counted as part of the surviving family members in this world. As a result, his/her name is still called at meal times. The mat on which his/her body was laid for last time is also left spread out to indicate that s/he is still present there among the living family. Because the soul is believed to linger, s/he must be accompanied. Out of this religious belief, a custom called *mété welawié* or *lonto walu* was born. This means to stay awake for eight nights accompanying and praying for the soul of the deceased.

The Manggaraians have a phrase that says *wela wie lami losé* which literally means that people must stay awake for eight nights to guard the mat on which the body of the deceased was laid for the last time. However, they do not guard an empty mat. Instead, they accompany the soul of the deceased who is believed to be still in the midst of his/her surviving family. The invisible presence of the soul of the dead

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in the midst of his/her surviving family is marked by the mat, on which his/her body was laid for the last time, and which is still stretched out open and not yet rolled up.

Apart from that, there are also some restrictions or abstinences called *ireng butek* for eight days in which the surviving family members and the entire village residents are not to go to their gardens to work or even to pick up vegetables. All these prohibitions are meant not only to comfort the bereaved family members, but mainly because the soul of the deceased is believed to be still there and is about to leave eternally. All surviving family members and residents of the entire village are therefore expected to be in solidarity with him/her in the last moments on earth before he/she departs to the world of the ancestors in heaven.

On the eighth day, the soul of the deceased is fully believed to be no longer with his/her surviving family. S/he is truly gone, and this event is indicated by rolling up the mat on which his/her body was laid for the last time prior to its interment. His/her membership in his/her clan family in the world is terminated. S/he is separated from his/her surviving family members for good and this separation ceremony is then celebrated in what is called *upacara kélah* (it literally means farewell ritual) which is supposed to be done on the eighth day following the pattern of *seki alo* (life cycle eight).

However, if for some reason, *kélah* ceremony on the eighth day cannot be done, then the ritual can be postponed until there is a time agreed by the family. The ritual of this postponement ceremony is called the *haungta'a* ritual, which implies that the surviving family members and the residents of the entire village are allowed to return to their daily routines in their gardens, while the soul of the deceased is told to roam for a while not too far away from the living family. When the time for

his/her *kélah* ritual is set, his/her soul will be officially called back amidst the surviving family and a final farewell ceremony called the *kélah* ritual is conducted.

#### **4. Theological Significance of the *Kélah* Ritual**

One of remaining theological questions on this ritual is: Is it true that, from the day of the interment of the body, the soul of the deceased does not immediately leave the world of the living for heaven as believed by the Manggaraians? Certainly, this question cannot be answered with an explicit answer yes or no. As previously discussed, almost all ethnic groups in the world believe that the souls of the deceased still linger with the living until a few days their death, and therefore are still counted and treated as part of the family members. After passing a certain period of time, the souls depart forever from the living and head for eternal life through a ritual similar to the one practiced by the Manggaraians in this study – the *kélah* ritual.

As reported by Hans-Joseph Klauck, ancient Greeks also used to offer sacrifices for the dead on the third, the seventh, on the ninth or on the thirtieth day that was reckoned from the day of burial [instead of day of the death] (Klauck, 2003:77). These religious practices are very similar to the ones invariably practiced by the Manggaraians. The day count for the ritual was in line with the Manggaraians' view of life cycle, namely: life cycle three (*seki telu*), life cycle four (*seki pat*), life cycle five (*seki lima*) or life cycle eight (*seki alo*). Most likely, these were the days on which ancient Greeks conducted a ritual similar to *kélah* ritual for the souls of their deceased in order to ensure their safe journey to heaven.

Similarly, ancient Romans used to have a special celebration for the dead on the ninth day after the death so called *novendialis* (Latin) which means taking place on the ninth day. Normally, prior to this celebration, ancient Romans offered some prayers on each day to ensure a safe journey of the dead to a new home where the *avium* (ancestors) live forever with God. On the day of the *novendialis* ritual, the living family officially terminated the membership of their deceased member from their social community (Jebadu, 2009:110-111; Jebadu, 2010:73-74) and join a new family of the *avium* with God in heaven.

Later on, early Christians in Rome took the ritual over and changed it into what is today called the *novena* prayer, a kind of 9-day prayer to prepare Christmas celebration or Christmas *Novena* (Klein, 2000:101). The evidence of this take over is today's celebration of *La Mesa Novendiale* (the Nine-Day Holy Mass) in Vatican for the newly deceased Pope. In 2005, for example, one of the authors (Jebadu) was studying in Rome. He witnessed Holy Masses celebrated for nine days at St. Peter's Church of the Vatican to offer prayers for the eternal rest of Pope John Paul II starting from the day after the burial of his body. It is notable that during these nine days, no election of a new Pope could be made, because in these days the passing Pope was still considered to be exist. Once *La Mesa Novendiale* was concluded, he was then considered to be no longer there and ascended to heaven, thus the Cardinals may hold a conclave to elect a new Pope.

The first message of Christianity is also about the mystery of human life in the afterlife. The Gospel proclaims that Jesus rose again from death on the third day (cf. Luke 24:7, Mathew 20: 19). Then Jesus who rose from death was a new Jesus, in the sense that the Risen Jesus lived

among His disciples in different way. He appeared to them a number of times, talking, eating, teaching and giving them advices but then He disappeared again (cf. Mathew 28:1-11, 16-20, Mark 16:9-18, Luke 24:13-49, John 20:11-29) On the fortieth day after His resurrection from death (Acts 1:3), Jesus said goodbye to His disciples, His living family, and ascended into heaven (Mark 16:19, Luke 24:51, Acts 1:).

For forty days, Jesus forbade His disciples to leave Jerusalem, which means they are temporarily not allowed to do any activity (cf. Acts 1: 4). In our opinion, similar to the beliefs of contemporary traditional societies as presented here in this study, one of the reasons of why it was taboo to leave Jerusalem at that time, is because it was Jesus' last moments to be with them in the world. His disciples were to accompany Him at these last moments before He finally parted with them definitively. In line with this, the Bible tells us that on the fortieth day after His resurrection from death, Jesus left His disciples on earth and He ascended to heaven (cf. Mark, 16:19, Acts 1:9). We would argue that Jesus' ascension on the fortieth day after His resurrection from death was similar to the principle of *kélah* ritual as believed and practiced by the Manggaraians in Flores. The ascension of Jesus to heaven was Jesus' *kélah* ritual at which Jesus went His way to heaven, while the disciples and His living family were still here on earth.

Last but not least, the Catholic Church also holds that because almost all humans, except Mary the Mother of Jesus, die in an unholy state. Their souls do not deserve to go straight to Heaven and happily meet God and all saints. They still need to halt somewhere between Hell and Heaven to purify themselves with the fire of God's love – purgatory. Of how long the soul of a deceased will be in that purification state, the Catholic

Church has no direct answer. “The decisive documents [of the Church] do not impose any obligation regarding fire, a place of purification, or the duration, kind and intrinsic nature of the punishment” (Klinger, 1975:1320). We argue that the Church’s teaching about the temporary detainment of the soul after corporal death in that state of purification (i.e. purgatory) is not different from the traditional religious belief system that the Manggaraians hold as presented here in this study. The soul of the deceased does not leave right away for heaven after the burial of the body but, rather, it stays in this world until the ritual of ultimate farewell is conducted.

## **Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated that *kélah ritual* practiced by the Manggaraians has some meaningful sacred religious values. It is meant to be a rite of life passage at which the membership of the deceased person in this world is officially terminated and a new membership in a new family with God in heaven begins. The surviving family members ensure the eternal membership of their passing family member through a series of prayers voiced in and around the ritual of *kélah*. Through this ritual, the soul of the dead is no longer part of the living family in this physical world. He ascends to heaven and is now expected to be part of the family of the heavenly Home.

When this rite is juxtaposed with the Catholic faith tradition, *kélah* ritual has some theological significances. This ritual means more profoundly for Manggaraians than what have been mentioned in the previous studies. This ritual, in fact, parallels with the traditional religious beliefs of ancient Greece, ancient Rome, and the teachings of the Catholic Church on purgatory, saying that the soul of a deceased

does not deserve to immediately join the saintly ancestors in heaven. This rite, therefore, needs to be further studied and then be incorporated to enrich Catholic faith and worship. Our research has been focused on the Manggaraian ethnic group in Flores. We wish other researchers to explore the wealth of religious rituals in other ethnic groups in East Nusa Tenggara Province or around Indonesian archipelago. Evenmore, further studies can be conducted in in other parts of the world where, other than systematic modern religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, traditional religions are still cherished and well treasured.

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