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Taflurut Nit:
Towards an Inculturated Theology
of the Communion of Saints for Kei People
in Eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Ancestor veneration is considered by some to be a primitive custom, outdated, and with no relevance to modern society. In this study, however, the researcher will show that ancestor veneration is alive and practiced in various cultures, especially among Kei people in East Indonesia to this day. This research focuses on ancestor veneration (Taflurut Nit) of the Kei people vis-a-vis the Catholic teachings on the Communion of Saints. Both the Kei ancestors and the Christian saints are revered because they are believed to be role models and wisdom figures for the members

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of their respective communities. Kei religious and cultural practices that focus on remembering, honoring, and expressing love for their ancestors and the saints have an important role in the lives of Kei Christians. The dissertation uses the process of inculturation to explore the potential of using the practices and beliefs of ancestor veneration among Kei people in re-articulating an aspect of the Christian faith. With the mutual interaction between the Judeo-Christian Tradition on the Communion of Saints and the present experience of ancestor veneration (Taflurut Nit) among Kei people, an inculturated theology for Kei Christians in East Indonesia is being proposed in response to the new evangelization envisioned by the Church.

Keywords: *ancestor veneration, kei people, communion of saints, inculturation, culture*

1. Introduction

Inculturation³ is the encounter between the Gospel and the local culture. As Pope John II said in his encyclical *Remptoris Missio*, through inculturation, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces people, together with their culture, into her own community.

In this sense, inculturation is the embodiment of Christian life and mission in a particular cultural environment. This means that this experience is not only embodied in certain elements of the culture (this is only a superficial accommodation), but becomes the principle that

³ The Second Vatican Council did not use the term inculturation directly but instead used the term adaptation (*Ad Gentes*). Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S. *Constructing local theologies*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), 2. The Second Vatican Council encourages the spread of the Gospel through various forms of local cultural approaches. As a cultural event, the Second Vatican Council teaches the urgency of the issue of inculturation. See, Herve Carrier, *Evangelizing the Culture of Modernity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 1-5.

animates, guides, and unites the culture by transforming and renewing it. Thus, inculturation creates something new (Heuken 2009). In inculturation is the idea that in the encounter with other cultures, the Church needs to make an incarnational movement into their culture but at the same time renew that culture through the redemption of Christ (Gallagher 1997, 1008). As Horacio de la Costa says, “Christianity is not only expressed but also thought and lived within the framework of the cultural traditions of the people to whom it is proclaimed (De Mesa 1987, 14).

Inculturation is not a new endeavour in the life and mission of the Catholic Church but was taken up again by the Second Vatican Council in 1965 to give birth to a meaningful and relevant theology for the people. The Second Vatican Council’s push for renewal also called *aggiornamento* made the Church more open to the world and paved the way for the emergence of inculturation or contextual theologies for local Churches that were commanded to make the proclamation of the Gospel rooted in the culture of the people and relevant to contemporary Christians. This paper seeks to investigate the concept of ancestor veneration in Eastern Indonesia, which is a popular cultural practice in Kei, and consider its potential to re-articulate the Church’s teaching on the Communion of Saints.

In the light of inculturation, the purpose of this paper is to enquire about how Kei Catholics seek to reconcile the veneration of ancestors embedded in their culture with their worship of God as taught by Jesus in Scripture. The Kei people use the term *Taflurut nit et sob Duad* (honour ancestors and worship God). This paper offers a way in which Kei Catholics can celebrate their Catholic faith without insulting their ancestors insofar as different elements in their traditions and beliefs can be brought together rather than pitted against each other so that new possibilities can be created to deepen and strengthen their faith. Faith and culture can be brought together in a way that enhances rather than diminishes all aspects of human life.

The Second Vatican Council through (See. *Gaudium et Spes*, in Kroeger, ed., #57 & 58, 318-322) *Gaudium et Spes*, pointed out the need for mutual respect between faith and culture as an important process in doing a theology of inculturation for local churches. Jose de

Mesa uses the term “listening heart” to describe this aspect of respect for local cultures. He states that “given the fact that the decree speaks of the ‘treasure’ that God has given to a particular culture, it is appropriate that in the theological task one should take a ‘listening heart,’ that is, a deep and sincere attitude of respect and appreciation” (De Mesa 1987, 19). Therefore, dialogue between the Christian faith, particularly the theology of the Communion of Saints and the Kei cultural practice of *Taflurut Nit* (ancestor reverence) is essential in doing inculturation theology for the Kei people.

Since the Catholic mission spread in Indonesia, especially in Kei during the colonial period, it was realised that Christian missionaries had difficulty proclaiming the Gospel in dialogue with the Kei culture, which is famous for its many religious ceremonies and rituals. While the Kei people saw their rites and rituals as based on the traditions of their ancestors, and therefore a sacred aspect of their lives, the missionaries who brought Christianity to Indonesia at the time thought these paganistic rites and rituals should be removed to pave the way for Western Catholicism to be planted in Kei soil. Kei cultural practices at the time were often condemned as evil, superstitious and heretical.⁴

Jose de Mesa, an Asian theologian from the Philippines, best known for developing contextual theology from a cultural perspective, where culture serves as the locus theologicus in initiating theological

⁴ When Christianity entered Kei around the 18th century by missionaries from the Netherlands, traditional Kei practices such as statues were partially destroyed and others brought by missionaries to the Netherlands. Until now, several statues are still stored in the mission museum in Tilburg, Netherlands. Places of reverence and worship for ancestors such as caves, large stones, trees were transformed by missionaries into places of prayer for Christians by building churches, Mary caves and Sacred Heart of Jesus caves. H. Haripranata. S.J. *The History of the Catholic Church in Kei, Tanimbar and West Irian 1888-1920*, (Ceritera Sejarah Gereja Katolik di Kei, Tanimbar dan Irian Barat 1888-1920), (Yogyakarta: Gunung Sopai, 2017). See, Marlon N. Ririmase. *Ancestral Worship in the Southeast Maluku Islands: Cultural Traces of its Material and Role for the Study of Regional Archeology* (Pemujaan Leluhur di Kepulauan Maluku Tenggara: Jejak Budaya Materi dan Peranannya bagi studi Arkeologi Kawasan). Journal, <https://www.neliti.com/publications/291818/pemujaan-leluhur-di-kepulauan-maluku-tenggara-jejak-budaya-materi-dan-perannya-b-pdf>. Accessed on October 14, 2020.

reflection says, “it is only when one is explicitly aware of his culture that we can adequately examine, assess, and utilise it to express Christian faith” (De Mesa 1987, 19). De Mesa further argues that the departure of contemporary local theology from the influence of Western theology will galvanise initiatives to consider local culture in doing local theology. He challenges Christians in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania to face the enormous task of reinterpreting the Good News to their communities in a fresh and understandable way without neglecting our faith heritage. In the face of this great challenge, we need to turn to our culture to unearth wisdom and insights that can shed light on our understanding of the faith relationship with God. De-stigmatising local cultures brought from the West is a must for those who want to contribute to the rethinking and reformulation of Christian faith in their own cultural context (De Mesa 1987).

To analyse the Kei people’s attachment to ancestor veneration and ritual practices that convey the social, cultural and religious significance of their traditional heritage, we examine the Kei people’s *Taflurut Nit* (ancestor veneration) tradition as a preamble to building a contextual theology of the Communion of Saints.

2. Methodology

This research follows the basic process and structural principles of doing contextual theology, particularly through a reciprocal dialogue between Judaeo-Christian Tradition and Culture (the local cultural experience of the people). The cultural heritage of *Taflurut Nit* (ancestor veneration) among the Kei people is analysed in its potential to re-articulate the theology of the Communion of Saints found in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. The interaction between the Jewish-Christian Tradition and *Taflurut Nit* aims to explore the potential of existing cultural experiences practised and preserved by the Kei people to be considered as a *locus theologicus* towards an inculturation theology of the Communion of Saints.

Jose de Mesa in constructing his theological reflection follows a synthetic methodological model. Through the synthetic model,

people can better know and understand God in the ways and styles of the culture they are familiar with (Bevans 2003, 88). The synthetic model places a theologian “midway between an emphasis on the experience of presence (context: experience, culture, social location, social change) and the experience of the past (scripture, tradition)” (Bevans 2003, 88). Thus, the synthetic model seeks to balance the gospel message and traditional doctrinal heritage with the cultural context of today’s society.

The methodology as suggested by de Mesa follows a three-step process in doing theology. *First*, we start with people’s problems, questions or concerns. *Second*, the two poles, human experience and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition will interact with each other; and third, a new tentative interpretation of faith will be articulated using cultural symbols, language, or values derived from the two poles mutual dialogue (De Mesa 2003).

The first stage is where questions, concerns, and relevant cultural aspects or elements serve as indicators of what theology should be. A meaningful theology should be catalysed by the context or culture in which theology is reflected upon and should be lived out. At this stage, when exploring questions, concerns, and issues, we must use socio-cultural analysis.

The second stage is a reciprocal dialogue between the two poles that are respectful and critical of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and *Taflurut Nit*’s cultural analysis. The starting point is the pole of cultural experience where the theme can be used as a theological locus or interpretative element to “see and discover the richness of the Jewish-Christian Tradition in relation to the context” (De Mesa 1999, 128). This emphasises a constructive dialogue or a respectful and critical correlation between Jewish-Christian Culture and Tradition (De Mesa 1999, 156).

The third stage is a new tentative interpretation of faith derived from the interaction between two traditions, namely the Judaeo-Christian Tradition (Communion of Saints) and Kei culture (*Taflurut Nit*). It puts forward a “tentative” theological interpretation that addresses the initial issues that triggered the theological discourse

in the first place. Through respectful and critical interaction, cultural resources (*Taflurut Nit*) and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition (Communion of Saints) are brought to address issues, questions or concerns indigenously through new interpretations of faith (De Mesa 1999, 161).

3. The Catholicisation of the Kei People and the *Taflurut Nit* Ritual

The Kei Islands, known as ‘*Nuhu Evav*’ in the local language, form an archipelago in the Southeast Moluccas, situated in the Banda Sea, east of Indonesia. The group is geographically divided into two parts: Small Kei Island (‘*Nuhu Roa*,’ meaning “island or village from the sea”) and Big Kei Island (‘*Nuhu Yuut*,’ meaning “taboo or forbidden island”). Encompassing an area of 7,856.70 km², these islands exhibit mountainous terrain, with the highest peak, Mount Dab, reaching 820 m on Big Kei.

The islands lack extensive rivers and lakes, and the soil composition varies between the dry coral soil of Kei Kecil and the challenging soil conditions of Kei Besar. The name “Kei” predates Dutch colonization, with historical references indicating variations like ‘Quey’ and ‘Ki.’ The first missionaries arrived in Kei in 1888, aiming to instigate cultural transformation, perceiving history’s progression from a “primitive state” to modernity and Christianity. The missionaries introduced European Christianized culture, intertwining their faith with local practices through a process of intercultural encounter.

The Kei people maintained their distinct culture, worldview, and religious practices alongside the introduced Christianity. Despite the missionaries’ establishment of separate mission centers, the Kei people continued living in their villages, fostering a dual worldview incorporating both Christian teachings and their own oral traditions. This coexistence resulted from historical negotiations and adaptations, allowing Kei oral traditions to align with Christian praxis.

Taflurut Nit, the Kei people's practice of honoring ancestors, involves rituals like offering betel nut and praying in the Kei language. This cultural expression persists, transcending generations, even after the Kei people embraced Christianity. Ancestor veneration, distinct from worship, involves seeking guidance and help from deceased ancestors as intermediaries to God. *Taflurut Nit* is deeply ingrained in Kei life, observed in various events, and considered a vital socio-cultural value, preserving local wisdom and ancestral heritage for hundreds of years. The close spiritual connection between the living and the deceased underscores the enduring significance of this cultural practice in the lives of the Kei people.

4. Communion of Saints

The Apostles' Creed, a foundational belief in the Catholic tradition, underscores the significance of saints in Christian faith, particularly martyrs who serve as exemplary figures in the pursuit of a relationship with Jesus Christ (Ramsey 1993, 129). The Communion of Saints, embedded in the Apostles' Creed, signifies the spiritual unity among living and deceased members of the Church, forming one mystical body with Christ as its head.

Historically, saints, especially martyrs, were revered in the early Church for emulating Jesus by enduring persecution (Flannery 2014, 421). Although influenced by pagan customs initially, Christian teachers like Polycarp, Jerome, and Augustine solidified the practice of honoring saints, gaining widespread acceptance.

The Communion of Saints encompasses the entire redeemed community, past, present, and future, united to Christ and each other through sacraments, particularly the Eucharist (Flannery 2014, 421). Baptism, the primary sacrament, signifies unity with Christ, emphasizing His immanence and redemptive sacrifice.

Saints, universally regarded as holy by various Church communities, play a pivotal role in the religious life of individuals and communities. They represent the triumph of the Church, serving as examples for the earthly Church still on pilgrimage (Flannery 2014,

421). Saints also engage in intercessory prayer, believed to have the potential for miracles due to their proximity to God. Christians seek their intercession, understanding that saints deliver petitions to God on behalf of the living.

The practical implications of the Communion of Saints involve mutual mindfulness and prayer among all united in Christ – saints in heaven, souls in purgatory, and members of the pilgrim Church. The Church, both militant and pilgrim, invokes prayer through the intercession of saints, expressing devotion and veneration in this communal spiritual endeavor.

5. *Taflurut Nit*: A Basis for Kei’s Contextual Communion of Saints Theology

The mystery of the life of Jesus Christ cannot be compared with the ancestors, but there are some aspects of the life of the ancestors that have similarities with the events of Jesus Christ to help the Kei people do contextual theology. This is to emphasise that the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ through a cultural approach, that is, faith expressed according to local mindsets and language patterns, is very important because it can help the Kei people to believe in Jesus Christ more deeply (Chupungco 1987, 99-100).

According to Edward Schillebeeckx and David Tracy, “Present Human Experience” is the first source of theology, followed by Scripture and Tradition (Riyanto 2020, 77). The explanation goes on to say, “The Critical Mutual Correlation Method,” places present human experience as one of the most important and primary sources for theology. The context of human life and experience must now be the point of departure for theology. Schillebeeckx criticises the traditional method of theology that starts theological reflection from Scripture and Tradition without paying attention to and dialoguing with present human experience. He sharply criticises theologians and students of theology who continue to use the old method of theology. He says, “A modern theology, a living theology must start from Human experience” (Riyanto 2020, 78). De Mesa sees the interaction between Judaeo-Christian Tradition and Culture so that one serves as

“an interpretative and critical guide for the other (De Mesa 1999, 121).” This aspect of culture is crucial for the Church to address, ensuring that the proclamation of Christ and His teachings becomes deeply rooted in the local culture. In this way, the values of culture and Christianity can mutually enrich each other (Paulus II 1990, 63).

Jesus did not hide Himself in the culture of the Kei people. If Christ is present in a place, then His presence is recognised by the people because He certainly reveals His presence through the values of the existing culture such as the ancestors. He is present so that the Kei people enjoy an abundant life (John 10:10). Thus, in accordance with the local culture, God through Christ uses various aspects of Kei culture as a medium to reveal His face, especially through the values of good life that the ancestors have shown to the Kei people.

Christ is also present and communicates with the Kei people through the local language. He was present and greeted the Kei people not as a foreigner with European physical characteristics, but He was present and greeted the Kei people implicitly through the ancestors. Thus, Christ introduced Himself to the Kei people through aspects of their culture. In this regard, the evangelist John asserts that “wherever Christ comes, he comes to his own people” (Jn 1:11). Therefore, the communication established by Christ with the Kei people did not only occur after the Church or missionaries came but had been going on for a long time through these existing cultural elements.

In response to this communication, the Kei people use everything available in their culture as a means to find the face of Christ. One of the cultural aspects used by Christ as a dialogue partner to communicate with the Kei people is His presence through the ancestors or the culture of *Taflurut Nit*. Therefore, his attention will be focused on the Kei people themselves because in accordance with the teachings of the Church, humans cannot be separated from their culture.

Starting from the explanation above, the Kei people began to reflect that before the Church came, God had already revealed Himself through ancestral figures (as the seed of the word sown in the Kei tribe), as He was present and greeted the Jews through Adam,

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and Jesus of Nazareth as the new Adam. This statement is to emphasise that God was with the Kei people long before the Church and missionaries came (Shorter 2006, 34). This can also be seen in the context of all human beings including the Kei people being created in God's own image and likeness (Dister 1987, 44).

Therefore, it is wrong to see missionaries as the ones who brought God to the land of the Kei people. God was not imported into the land of the Kei people nor did any country export God. Rather, God brought missionaries to the land of the Kei people. God created these missionaries, sent them to the land of the Kei people, protected them on the way to the land of the Kei people, and sent them to the Southeast Maluku region. God did not wait for the missionaries before they arrived among the Kei people. Why? Because long before the missionaries arrived and the Kei people were baptised Catholic, God was already present with the Kei people through a number of positive cultural values such as the appreciation of "*duad kratat* or *duad ler vuan*" and also His presence through the ancestors (*Nit Fulfulik* = Good Spirit) and Kei rites and local wisdom.

From this perspective, the honouring of Kei ancestors (*Taflurut Nit*) is a preparation for the Gospel. In other words, if a Kei Christian chooses to believe in the Communion of Saints, then this belief is facilitated because Kei Christians have a background understanding of ancestor cults. In this sense, honouring Kei ancestors serves as a "preparation" for the Communion of Saints.

6. Ancestor Veneration (*Taflurut Nit*) and Saints

If we look at the phenomenon of ancestor veneration and Christians honouring saints, it can be said that these two honours are the same. Both ancestors and saints are honoured rather than worshipped, as the only one to be worshipped is God (*Duad Ler-vuan*). Scholars who speak of "honour" rather than "veneration" take into account cultural and religious sensitivities. Kei ancestor veneration should not be confused with worshipping deceased members of the Kei community. Ancestor veneration consists primarily of the act of

honouring and loving a deceased person whose spirit continues to live on and engage with his or her living family. Kei ancestor recognition is a construct of respect that is usually associated with intimacy between deceased ancestors and their descendants. Ancestors are honoured for their merit to their descendants.

Hippolyte Delehaye in *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography* tells us that there is a fundamental difference between the veneration of the saints of the Church and the heroes of Greek paganism (Delehaye 1961, 160). From the very beginning, there was the issue of Christian veneration of martyrs being a pagan act. St Augustine had to explain to the unbelievers and give clear guidelines to the believers distinguishing between the veneration given to the saints and the worship directed to God. This tradition has been carried on since the early churches of Christianity. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between worship and veneration in many cases. The Catholic Church recognises that crosses or statues of Mary and the saints are not to be worshipped. From as early as the time of St Augustine of Hippo, a distinction was made between the worship of gods and the veneration of saints. The one worthy of worship is God, referred to as *latría*, while the saints are honoured not in themselves but only as channels of grace from God, *dulia*, while veneration of Mary is referred to as *hyperdulia* (Wilson 1983, 4).

When the Protestant Church considers Catholics to worship idols, it does not make the Catholic Church abandon the statues of Jesus, Mary, and the saints. When we make a clear distinction between worship of God and veneration of ancestors and Saints as two different forms of religious piety, it is concretely seen for example, that the Kei people honour the fourth commandment (by respecting their ancestors) *Taflurut Nit* or Saints and do not violate the first commandment (worshipping other gods) *Sob Duad Ler-vuan*.

In various regions of Indonesia, especially Kei, it is seen that these practices of honour have always left a solid model of faith in people's lives. The model of faith is preserved from one generation to the next as a tradition. In this understanding, the practice of honouring ancestors and saints can be clearly seen as a manifestation of the model of faith brought by humans from previous generations. According to

Jebadu, there are two truths that form the basis for the practice of honouring ancestors and saints, namely: *first*, the belief in life after the death of the body. *Second*, the belief in the existence of God as the sole source of all life, both the temporary life of humans on earth and the eternal life after the death of the body (Jebadu 2009, 9). This means that religious practices centred on veneration, love, and remembrance of ancestors and saints indicate the continuity of life after bodily death and faith in God as the sole guarantor of man's eternal life after death.

Taking into account what has been said above, it becomes clear that the theme around the honouring of ancestors and saints, is not new in the history of human life, but is a reality of human life that exists and continues to be practised, maintained, and preserved by human-kind. For the Kei people, *Taflurut Nit* is a popular cult that emerged from Kei and is practised by almost all Kei people. This is also the case with the practice of honouring saints. Saints are venerated by Christians since the early centuries of Christianity, or since the martyrs.

Ancestors and saints are honoured for their supernatural excellence based on the belief that they are in heaven. The living believe that ancestors and saints intercede for the living with God (*Duad*). The living faithful or descendants perform many rituals in glorifying and invoking the help of God (*Duad*) through the intercession of ancestors and saints. The faithful or descendants perform praise and emulate the virtues of ancestors and saints, private and public prayers, and take their names.

The basis for honouring ancestors and saints is the same, filial love. The aim is to maintain a good relationship between the living and the dead, both ancestors and saints, so that their safety and well-being are well preserved. Ancestors and saints are honoured because they have a relationship or closeness with God. They become friends of God and can play the role of God's messengers. Because of their close relationship with God, deceased ancestors and saints are believed to be able to communicate God's will and His saving grace to people still living in the world. Saints are intrinsically joined to Christ, which makes them one with the Church on earth and provides an eschatological destiny for all the faithful. The Church on earth,

following old practices, honours the memory of the saints; the saints, on their part, reveal the divine face of God.

Christians honor the saints out of love for their exemplary lives. Saints serve as role models of faith and morals, demonstrating God's generosity and love for the faithful. The saints, having experienced God's generosity in their lives, dedicate themselves entirely to the Lord. Recognizing their holiness, the Catholic Church believes that saints, who were good people in life, are now in Heaven. Pobee, in his analysis of Pauline theology, writes that "the loyalty of the saint to Christ by accepting persecution guarantees a place in the kingdom of God, in heaven" (Pobee 1985, 67). Thus, the Catholic Church recognises and believes in their holiness, and they deserve to be honoured.

Furthermore, honoring the saints is a crucial aspect of the faithful's spiritual development. When the Church designates November 1 as a feast day for all the saints, it underscores the significant role saints play in fostering the growth of the faithful's faith. The veneration of saints signifies the Church's celebration of the triumphant grace of the only salvation found in Jesus Christ. The essence of Jesus' salvation lies in God's love for humanity, created in His own image and likeness. Despite man beings' pride and disobedience leading to their fall into sin and separation from God, God's love for humanity remains unwavering. God does not desire humankind's destruction. In the fullness of time, He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to atone for the sins of all humankind, from the first to the last. Through His incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus restored human's relationship with God. Through the merit of Jesus Christ, humanity can once again enjoy a life united with God in eternity. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14:6). And this is also the conviction of His followers, "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12). Paul, in his letter to Timothy, says that God from the beginning wanted all humans to be saved (cf. 1 Tim 2:3-6). The Gospel of John states that "he who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him ... and those who have done good will go out and

rise to eternal life, but those who have done evil will rise to condemnation” (Jn 3:36; 5:29). This is the meaning of salvation, being redeemed from the state of sin to life in eternal bliss in heaven. In this sense, the Church wishes to give thanks for the fruits of Christ’s salvation that the saints have enjoyed.

Ancestors and saints have become role models in good things. In the practice of ancestor veneration, living families serve deceased ancestors by making rituals of various kinds. Kei cultural practices, including food offerings, dances and other rituals, are what Karl Rahner calls “religious activities explicitly directed to God in prayer and in metaphysical reflection” (Rahner 1996, 53). The *Taflurut Nit* ritual in Kei culture, for example, may seem an extraordinary and spectacular cultural practice to outsiders. However, the Kei people see it as a natural practice that must be done as an important part of the Kei people’s lives. For the Kei people, the *Taflurut Nit* ritual must be performed as an obligation of all Kei people as a form of respect for the ancestors. According to their understanding, if the *Taflurut Nit* ritual is not performed, the ancestors can become angry, and the descendants may face punishment in the form of disasters, such as illness or even death. This is different from the situation where Christians do not honor saints, as the saints do not become angry.

The belief in the power of *Duad-Nit* to organise, regulate, protect, and maintain the lives of Kei people has given birth to an attitude of respect and sincere submission to *Duad-Nit* as the source and origin of Kei people’s lives. This attitude is reflected in the *Taflurut Nit* tradition and celebrated in ritual and local wisdom celebrations. The Kei people honour their ancestors through ceremonies performed both vertically and horizontally. The vertical honour ceremony shown to *Duad* such as *sobsob mehen*, which consists of *sak nit rir waung* and *sobsob yot* and *sobsob lor* consists of *sobsob yot matvhuil*, *urat ledar lor* and *sobsob fuun naun*. While the horizontal honour ceremony shown to the *nit* is *ledar matan vhavhain* and *belan enso ne yaat enwel*. In this honouring ceremony, *Duad-Nit* is given various offerings. While there is also a lot of local wisdom practised by the Kei people such as *Yan-ur Mangohoi* kinship, *Larvul Ngabal* customary law, *Belang*, *Sasi*, *Rinin*, etc.

These rituals and local wisdom have become an integral part of the Kei people's lives to this day. That way, they repeatedly experience that the figures of *Duad Ler-vuan* and *Nit* who they believe have lived happily in heaven continue to give them protection, blessings, and become protectors of their daily lives. The ceremonies are usually performed at homes, cemeteries, *woma*, or places considered sacred.

The rituals performed to honor ancestors, such as visiting special places (mitu=sacred places), graves, and providing offerings, are more or less similar to what Christians do for saints. Christian reverence for saints takes many forms, including pilgrimages to tombs, relics, prayers, novenas, and devotions to saints. This involves bringing offerings of food, flowers, and burning candles in front of statues of saints (Mary). In Kei, when the missionaries arrived, they not only built churches but also Marian caves and Sacred Heart caves. This practice is observed in all Catholic villages in Kei. The missionaries taught devotions and novenas to Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. They formed Apostolate groups for people devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Marian Congregations for those devoted to Mary. Due to this heritage, the Kei people are very devoted in practicing their faith.

Ancestors and saints are honoured for their heroic and sacrificial roles. For the Kei people, ancestors have a formidable role for their descendants. For the Kei people, ancestors are people who are willing to die, fight to defend their village and descendants, suffer in defence of their descendants. Saints, on the other hand, are willing to sacrifice their lives in defence of their faith in God. Devotion to God by the saints means (sacrificing their own lives for God). Saints offer and sacrifice their lives for God as a form of martyrdom. Saints are people who devote their lives to sharing God's teachings with others. They are willing to sacrifice their lives just to defend their faith. They have become martyrs for the faithful. For that reason, saints deserve to be honoured.

Marco Rizzi, in Origen on *Martyrdom*, argues that Origen makes a distinction between bloody martyrdom which symbolises Christian perfection so that martyrs are associated with Christ the

saviour and “inner,” or “spiritual” martyrdom, as “the ascetic practice of the life and virtues of the martyrs (Rizzi 2009, 469). Likewise, Alan Segal, in *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*, argues that the death of saints is a common phenomenon. He submits that the authors of the Book of Daniel adopted an idea that was very popular in the ancient Near East as an answer to the age-old question of why the righteous suffer; the idea of resurrection as a reward for martyrs and saints (Segal 2004, 292).

In Kei, Bishop John Aerts and his companions have demonstrated martyrdom. Their dedication to God did not waver and it led to their martyrdom. The example of Msgr Aerts and his companions shows how dedicated and devoted the saints are to God. They were willing to sacrifice their lives for their faith. The Apostle John recorded the words of the Lord Jesus regarding the seed, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only one seed; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

When Kei people communicate with ancestors, they engage with something perceived as living, much like Christians praying or talking to saints. Conversations with ancestors and saints lack formality; there must be a tangible object present, allowing living beings to visualize the concerned ancestors and saints. Therefore, statues, *woma*, young coconut leaves in *rinin* ceremonies, or other relics of ancestors become objects that help families visualize their ancestors. Similarly, statues, pictures, crucifixes, rosaries, or objects representing the saints become dynamic means that bring the faithful closer to the saints.

In essence, the presence of relics or representations of ancestors and saints creates a feeling among the Kei people that the distance between the living and the dead (ancestors and saints) is narrowed, fostering a sense of unity between them. The personified ancestral figures, embodied in statues, etc., serve as the 'visual aids' of the Kei people, playing a role similar to the statue of St. Francis Xavier erected in front of the Diocese of Amboina Maluku, adorned with flowers every December 3 when people celebrate its patron's day. This

is comparable to the caves and statues of the Virgin Mary found throughout Indonesia.

8. *Taflurut Nit* as Memorising for the Dead

The results indicate that *Taflurut Nit* is a form of anamnesis or memorializing the deceased. It is believed that the departed can benefit the living with otherworldly wisdom, while the living benefit the departed through prayers, sacrifices, and memorials like *Taflurut Nit*. This ceremony, honoring ancestors, is observed in Kei culture and many Asian cultures. Kei people visit the graves of their relatives, offering food and drink (*buuk mam*), while praying for the repose of the departed souls.

Although ancestor veneration is a common practice in Asia, *Taflurut Nit* in Kei exemplifies an inculturation practice that explains the mutual interaction between Judaeo-Christian traditions and human experience. Holy Communion or the Eucharist in church liturgy aligns with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, while *Taflurut Nit* aligns with the Kei human experience of honoring their ancestors. This elucidates why the Kei people consistently remember their departed through *Taflurut Nit* – an offering of food and drink (*buuk mam*) in individual and village ceremonies combined with Catholic prayers. This is done to express communion between the living and the dead and to give thanks for their lives.

The belief in the power of *Duad-Nit* to organize, regulate, protect, and maintain the lives of Kei people has fostered an attitude of respect and sincere submission to *Duad-Nit* as the source and origin of Kei people's lives. This attitude is reflected in the tradition of *Taflurut Nit* and celebrated in ritual celebrations and local wisdom. Edmund Leach, as cited by Eller, defines rituals as behaviors that form part of a sign system and serve to communicate information (Eller 2007, 110). Meanwhile, Catherine Bell, in her book *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, argues that ritualization involves various culturally specific strategies to distinguish certain activities from others, to create and privilege a qualitative difference between the sacred (the holy) and the profane (the ordinary), and to ascribe those differences to the realm

of human reality that exceeds human powers as living actors (Bell 1992, 74). It is clear that ritual behavior or action is the most important element in people's cultural life.

Rituals performed by the Kei people are shown to the Divine *Duad* namely *sobsob memehen* and *sobsob lor* and rituals shown to *Nit*, namely *ledar matan vhavhain* and *belan enso ne yaat enwel*. Meanwhile, there are many local wisdoms practised by the Kei people such as *Yan-ur Mangohoi* kinship, *Larvul Ngabal* customary law, *Belang*, *Sasi*, *Rinin*, *Woma*, etc. These rituals and local wisdom have become an integral part of the lives of the Kei people to this day. That way, they repeatedly experience that the figures of *Duad Ler-vuan* and *Nit* who they believe have lived happily in heaven continue to give them protection, blessings, and become protectors of their daily lives.

In the Judaeo-Christian Tradition, Christians express their faith in the existence of a creator God, in Jesus, and in the Holy Spirit through the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist. This sacramental feast is commemorated as memories or anamneses by the Church in communion – the *communio* of all God's people, encompassing the Church militant, the Church triumphant, and those in purgatory. It is a communion with the Triune God. The liturgy serves as the Church's expression of gratitude as *communio* for God's blessings and grace bestowed upon humanity and the entire world.

Sacrosantum Concilium views the liturgy as the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ by the Mystical Body of Christ, the Head and its members. The content of the priestly office of Jesus Christ, namely God's work of salvation, is carried out by Jesus Christ. In the liturgy, the word of God is recited, prayers are offered, and hymns are chanted and sung. The people of God, as a Communion of Saints with other creatures, are sanctified again by God through the action of His Holy Spirit. The sense of union with God in which liturgical celebrations arise is a way in which communal life between human beings (both living and deceased, including ancestors) and all of life with God will always be maintained. *Communio Sanctorum* is communal life with God through the Holy Spirit, the source of life and existence of human beings and the whole world.

People who are part of these two traditions become part of God's life as the giver of life. They experience God's presence in the rituals and liturgies they celebrate. In rituals and liturgies, prayers of supplication are offered to God through the intercession of ancestors and saints. Their practices in rituals and liturgical celebrations may be very different, as their backgrounds are different and unique. Yet they carry one common purpose, to surrender to God, to ask for His blessings and mercy, to follow what God has said through their traditions from generation to generation, and to seek His protection in times of calamity and misery.

A compelling example of this anamnesis event is the First Mass ceremony of a new priest in Kei. Two crucial points from the celebration of the First Mass are pertinent to this research. Firstly, the celebration in *woma* reflects the aspect of communion. Phrases like "*lar enbaba ne wel ensoso*" (the journey of blood relations) and the Kei philosophy of "*Ai ni Ain, Fuut ain mehe ngifun, manut ain mehe tilur, and yan-ur mangohoi*" imply that everyone present at the *woma* event is united through a common blood bond and descent. Despite coming from different villages and lineages, and even people who are not from the Kei tribe, all are united into one family during the *woma* ceremony.

The phrases of the ancestors mentioned above are integral to traditional prayers in *woma*, emphasizing that the celebration unites the living (descendants) and the dead (ancestors), those close (in the village) and those far away (overseas). The celebration of family and fellowship in *woma* culminates with the Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration itself represents communion among all the people of the Church – the pilgrim Church, the Church of the victors (saints), and those in purgatory. The Eucharist unites all people, and Jesus becomes the focal point of that meeting and unity. The incarnated Jesus, who lived, suffered, died, and rose again, is revealed in the Eucharistic event.

The desire for communion with ancestors and saints takes on a more explicit and urgent tone during the communion rites. The theme of communion emerging from the traditional *Taflurut Nit* ritual in *woma* serves as a poignant reminder of the Eucharist in the lives of

Christians. The *Taflurut Nit* ritual serves as a call for the Christian faithful to participate in the Eucharist, where communion with the Triune God, the saints, the ancestors, each other, and nature can be enacted and renewed.

Secondly, the liturgical celebrations mentioned above emphasize the significant role of Kei ancestors as mediators. The ceremony at the *woma* serves as a thanksgiving for the fulfillment of prayers offered to *Duad Ler-vuan* and *Nit*. During this ceremony, the new priest enters the traditional house for a reception ceremony in gratitude for the successful outcome. At the traditional house, the priest receives ancestral traditional objects such as mas and partakes in betel nut and areca nut, serving as a reminder, an anamnesis, that prayers have been answered by *Duad* and *Nit*.

While performing the ceremony at the *woma*, traditional prayers are offered to express gratitude and to request the presence of *Duad* and *Nit* to partake in the Eucharistic celebration. This mediating role is further highlighted in the prayers during the Eucharistic Celebration. For instance, in the prayers of the people or songs performed in the Kei language, the role of *Duad Nit* is explicitly mentioned.

9. Jesus as Progenitor Par Excellence

9.1. Incarnation

Christ called Himself the Son of God and identified Himself with God. By addressing God as His Father, He did nothing but affirm that He is the Son of God. In fact, He equated Himself with God. He said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9), because “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). The same is true of the prophets. The Old Testament prophets foretold His coming. Only Christ reveals the true face of God, which in Pope Francis’ “bull” *Misericordiae Vultus*, Jesus Christ is called the face of the Father’s mercy (MV 1).

Apart from being God, Jesus Christ is also God made flesh incarnate (cf. Jn 1:1-2, 14-15). He is not only true God but also true

man. As a human being, He underwent all the experiences that human beings typically go through: being born, having a biological mother, eating, drinking, feeling emotions such as anger and sadness, socializing, and forming friendships. Jesus stands out as the most influential person in history (Keen 2007, 6). He was a Jew from Galilee, a descendant of David, and the son of Mary, the wife of Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth (Houlden 2003, 429-430). After receiving baptism from John, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God through His works, including miracles, and His teachings, conveyed through parables. Jesus intentionally associated with the common people, those who were suffering and marginalised.

He loved God, and this love compelled Him to serve God and others selflessly, without seeking anything for Himself. Among His disciples, He took on the role of a servant (Lk 22:26), prioritizing service over being served (Mk 10:45). His focus was on the weak, needy, and poor (Mt 9:36). Jesus performed numerous miracles and acts of kindness for those He encountered. He fed the hungry (Lk 9:13-17), healed the sick (Mark 6:53-56), restored sight to the blind (Lk 18:40-43), enabled the deaf to hear (Mark 7:32-35), made the lame walk (Lk 5:24-25), cleansed lepers (Mt 8:1-3; Lk 17:11-19), and even raised the dead (Lk 7:11-17; John 11:38-44). His mission was to seek the lost (Lk 15) and demonstrate to them that God loved them. Jesus's sole intention was to fulfill God's will in the present moment. Through His acts of service, He aimed to help people recognize the goodness of God (Mk 2:12), for God is inherently good.

The Christian theological perspective on the incarnation aligns seamlessly with the Kei cultural view, making it accessible and acceptable. In the Kei cultural understanding of God, He is acknowledged as a Spirit but can also take on a human form, a concept referred to as "*Duad kabav*" (God takes on human form or God makes Himself human). In this regard, the Kei cultural view aligns with the Christian notion of the incarnation, where God becomes human.

However, a deeper exploration of Christian theology reveals that the incarnation is intricately connected to God's Son, Jesus Christ. In this understanding, Jesus Christ incarnates His Father, as the Son and the Father are understood to be one. Observing the Son is

synonymous with observing the Father, as the Son resides in the Father, and the Father in the Son. This profound unity underscores the Christian concept of the incarnation.

The Kei culture's view of God is revealed in its myths. Actually, in Kei culture, there is one God whom they call by various names such as *Duad Ler-vuan*, *Duad Karatat*, and *Duad Hukum* (God who punishes). According to a legend written by Fr Hendrik Geurtjens, MSC, an anthropologist who worked in Kei for a long time, the ancient Kei people were savages who lived like animals and with animals in the forest. People did not recognise private property, nor marriage; they liked to kill and plunder. Then there appeared a *Nabi Isah* who came from the west. But this *Nabi Isah* did not bring his own teachings, but those of his master, who was greater than he, but who had been taken up to the high heavens. When he ascended to the sky where the *Duad ler-vuan* lived, there was left on a rock on the mountain where he ascended, his footprints. With great love and longing for his master, *Nabi Isah* had kissed those footprints. At that moment the spirit of his master had entered him.

The main subjects taught by *Nabi Isah* were the right to private property and the stipulations regarding marriage. As a watchdog over the implementation of these regulations, he preached the *Duad Hukum*. As a sign, *Nabi Isah* introduced people to a prohibition sign called *hawear bal-warin*. The prohibition sign consisted of a coconut branch, the leaves of which were slightly woven. In its centre were often hung some mini baskets, also woven from coconut leaves, containing some small offerings. This sign was then placed in front of the property to be protected, and also in the room where a newly married person lived, so that everyone would know that the woman living there was no longer available for marriage but had become the property of her husband. *Nabi Isah* served as a watchdog, observing people who broke the law and reporting them to *Duad Ler-vuan*. The law he brought changed the behaviour of the Kei people from bad to good. The Kei people became afraid of *Duad Ler-vuan*, so to avoid *Duad Ler-vuan's* wrath, the Kei people made offerings to please *Duad Ler-vuan*.

9.2. Jesus the True Mediator

Seeking the prayers of the saints to address one's needs is an act of entrusting everything into God's hands, serving as an expression of faith. Prayers find expression through various devotions directed to God through the intercession of the saints. People convey their prayers to God by seeking the intercession of the saints, engaging in devotions, and participating in processions dedicated to the saints. During feasts commemorating the saints, Kei Christians actively participate in processions. They adorn their homes with pictures of saints and maintain a continuous practice of burning candles for prayer.

Since its inception, the Catholic Church has upheld the practice of praying for the spirits of the deceased. Kei Catholics faithfully observe the practice of honoring ancestors and invoking their intercession for relatives still navigating the challenges of the world. For instance, in Kei, the observance of the spirit mass on 2 November serves as an example of this practice.

In the act of honoring ancestors, prayer stands out as the most prominent visible expression through which Kei Christians seek the assistance of their ancestors, believed to be in the presence of Christ in heaven. Kei Christians implore their ancestors to intercede on behalf of those still navigating the earthly pilgrimage. If the veneration of ancestors is integrated into the Holy Mass, it is suggested that the ancestors be included in the line of saints, with their names explicitly mentioned if possible.

The Catholic Church, in its reverence for all saints, also seeks their intercession, as evidenced in prayers such as the Great Thanksgiving I. The Church holds the belief that saints, having shared in the company of Jesus in Heaven, persistently invoke God's grace and favor for the Church that continues its pilgrimage in the world. This perspective extends to include the ancestors who are thought to be in the presence of God in heaven.

Similar to the saints, ancestors who have triumphed in heaven with Christ are believed to intercede on behalf of their family members still journeying on earth. Typically, these requests are conveyed

through prayers, novenas, devotions, pilgrimages, and other ecclesiastical rituals.

The Church or traditional Kei society, of course, does not replace the role of ancestral intercession that is in the process of purification or the role of the Saint with the role of the intercession of Jesus Christ. Likewise, Mary as mediator never replaces the role of Jesus. The Second Vatican Council affirmed that the essence of Mary's mediation in no way contradicts, competes, or even contradicts the mediation of Christ.

The role of the patriarchs or saints stems from the patriarchship of Christ. Christ, as the sole mediator between God and humanity, fulfills a unique and unparalleled role. In the Old Testament, God employed prophets and priests to serve as intermediaries between Himself and the people of Israel. Prophets were sent to convey God's messages to Israel, preserving the bond between Him and His people. Meanwhile, priests carried out sacrificial rituals on behalf of the Israelites to maintain communion with God. Despite the significant role played by these intermediaries in the Old Testament, it was intended to highlight the profound need for a True Mediator. The book of Hebrews explicates that Christ's role as the genuine mediator addresses all the inadequacies of the previous system (Heb 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 11:40).

Paul's perspective in 1 Timothy regarding Jesus as a mediator aligns with Catholic teaching, which asserts that this mediation includes His saints who have joined Him in heaven. Due to the intimate union of the saints with Jesus, their desires are wholly centered on Him. The saints, in their closeness to Jesus, intercede through prayers for the faithful who are still on their earthly pilgrimage, guiding them towards heaven.

The concept of Jesus as the mediator originates from the fall of humanity into sin, which severed the relationship between humans and God. Jesus incarnated as a human to fulfill His role as a mediator, restoring the connection between humanity and God. The reasons for Jesus being the mediator are twofold: Firstly, He is the only true God and Man capable of bridging the gap between God and humanity,

accomplishing this through the redemptive work on the cross. Secondly, He alone, as the true God and Man, submitted entirely to His Father for the salvation of humankind.

The exclusive mediator between God and humanity is Christ Jesus, the Word made flesh, the incarnate Son of God. Previous forms of mediation in the Old Testament were shadows and anticipations of Christ, and their efficacy was inseparable from Christ's pre-incarnate role within them. This is evident in the Spirit of Christ speaking to the prophets (1 Peter 1:10) and Christ's role being manifested in the journey of Israel led by Moses (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

10. Summary

This paper explores how Kei Catholics can seamlessly integrate their Catholic faith with the honoring of their ancestors. By bringing together various elements from their traditions and beliefs, the research seeks to enhance faith and cultural identity without conflict. The goal is to contribute to reconciling the worship of God and the honoring of ancestors (*Sob Duad, Taflurut Nit*), showcasing how Kei Catholics celebrate their faith within their rich cultural context.

The study delves into the integration between Kei *Taflurut Nit* culture and the Communion of Saints in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. Despite performing *Taflurut Nit* rituals that predate the Catholic Church's entry, Kei people still feel a connection to Catholicism. Examining the Theology of the Communion of Saints, the research identifies coherence with Kei culture's belief system. It argues that the communion includes not only canonized saints but also all those in heaven and purgatory, forming a profound connection.

The research highlights that Kei ancestors seek acknowledgment and prayers from their living families, facilitating their purification in purgatory. Ancestors act as mediators between God and humans, analogous to the intercession of Mary and the saints in Christianity. While not rivaling the unique intercession of Jesus, the intercession of saints enhances it, drawing strength from Christ's

surplus merit. The study reveals that Kei Catholics pray both to their ancestors and to Jesus through the intercession of the saints, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their religious practices.

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