




Meeting God at the Foot of Mount Sinabung on Karonese rituals in terms of the Christian faith

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Abstract

Mount Sinabung started to erupt on September of 2010. This event shocked the Karonese living around the mountain. Therefore, they held various rituals to limit bad luck combined with offering sacrifices according to traditional Karonese traditional practices, in the hope that Mount Sinabung would finally calm down. Despite the official prohibition declared by the church, many Karonese Christians still carry out such rituals. The Karonese people, are an ethnic group from North Sumatra, Indonesia, and they have a very rich tradition of Christian faith, particularly in Protestant denominations. The rituals, for them, are however based on ancestral inheritance, and they believe that rituals can be a way to bring the almighty to provide help for the problems people may face in various situations of often dire stress. Through this paper, the author intends to contemporary literature review to find answers on how Karonese Christians should respond to natural disasters, such as the eruption of Mount Sinabung, especially bearing in mind the role of Christian rituals within a contextual theology approach. Contextual theology utilized local culture to view the problems faced by people in this study. This paper asserts that Christian rituals can indeed assist Karonese Christians in responding to natural disasters by providing spiritual, emotional, and communal support that aligns with their cultural and religious beliefs and practices.

Keywords: Karonese people, cultural practices, rituals, faith, disasters.

Introduction

In a general sense, disasters can be viewed as being part of God's judgment. Humans want to run the world their way, and God allows them to do as they wish -they have free choice. Disasters are a reminder that this world is not the way God intends. Adam and Eve's sin brought judgement that has resulted in pestilence, famine, disease, natural disasters and death, and it changed the world.

Mount Sinabung is a stratovolcano in the Karo plateau of Karo Regency, North Sumatra, Indonesia, and it is about 40 kilometres from the Lake Toba super-volcano. It erupted after more than 400 years of dormancy, obliging many thousands of people to evacuate their homes. Smoke and volcanic ash began to spew from Mount Sinabung on August 27, 2010. The subsequent eruption occurred on September 3, with volcanic ash rising as high as 3 km. The second eruption, later the same day, occurred in tandem with a volcanic earthquake that was felt up to 25 km away (Tempo.Co, Wednesday, January 18, 2017). Mount Sinabung had been quiet for almost 400 years. Therefore, the eruption surprised everyone, particularly the Karo people who live in the region immediately around the location of the mountain. While in shock, they had to leave their homes and fields in order to flee with their families to safety. Local governments and churches in



the area, especially the Protestant Batak Karo Church (GBKP), provided much assistance and care to those affected by the eruptions. In fact, the GBKP is still helping those refugees who have not been able to return to their homes. In recognition of the significant service provided to the refugees by the GBKP, the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), a government body, gave the GBKP special award (Satu Harapan. Com, Thursday, June 15, 2017).

A few days after Mount Sinabung erupted, people in the community around the mountain held a *Sarilala*, a traditional ritual to protect the population from hostile spirits. Guru Baso, (a local shaman) lead the ritual, which included offerings of cigarettes, flowers, and various crops. A similar ritual was carried out at Lau Kawar, a lake at the foot of Mount Sinabung, in which a white goat and an ox were released as a kind of sacrifice. According to residents, they held the rituals because neither scientists nor the government had been able to warn them about the eruption (GoBatak.com, 15 October 2012). The rituals the community performed at that time had not been conducted for many years. Many of the Karo people concluded that the eruption of Mount Sinabung signified their error in neglecting to respect their ancestors by following the usual traditions. By completing the rituals mentioned above, they hoped Mount Sinabung would be quiet again and life could return to normal (Viva.co.id, 2 September 2010).

Traditional ceremonies to stop further eruptions of Mount Sinabung are still being held regularly in the community. The rituals are performed in various places that are on, or otherwise associated with, the mountain. In October 2016, a number of Karo residents held an *erpangir kulau* (cleansing in the river) ceremony at a hot springs at Lau Sidebuk-debuk, near the base of Mount Sibayak . As part of the ritual, a local shaman made offerings of field produce and chickens to the ancestors (Viva.co.id., 31 October 2016).

The rituals held by people around Mount Sinabung, including some Karo Christians, and the absence of an official church response to those who are practicing these ceremonies, have lead some church members to question the Christian response to the ongoing eruptions of Mount Sinabung. Analgin Ginting, a Karo church leader and blogger, has written about the apparent incongruity in the actions of some church members. According to Ginting, the spiritual identity of these people is tightly associated with the mountain itself. (Kompasiana, November 26, 2013). In this paper, the author will address how Christians could possibly deal with natural disasters, like the eruption of Mount Sinabung. In particular, the focus will be on theological and contextual considerations of Christian rituals and some ideas are raised.

Method

The Authors used a qualitative technique, which is an endeavor to investigate, discover, disclose, and elucidate the significance and pattern of things that are examined holistically, was employed in this study. In this method, the pattern is a rule, structure, or formula that generates a model, whilst the meaning functions as a function, value, and norm (Cresswel, 2021). The authors analyse to show the local knowledge that was accepted and believed in the Karo Regency throughout each stage of the Sinabung disaster management process, as well as to allow for the comprehension of social phenomena from the subjects' point of view. Through this paper, the author intends to contemporary literature review to find answers on how Karonese Christians should respond to natural disasters, such as the eruption of Mount Sinabung, especially bearing in mind the role of Christian rituals within a contextual theology approach. Contextual theology utilized local culture to view the problems faced by people in this study. This paper asserts that Christian rituals can indeed assist Karonese Christians in responding to natural disasters by providing spiritual, emotional, and communal support that aligns with their cultural and religious beliefs and practices

Result and Discussion

Linguistic-Cultural Rituals

Rituals are a way to bring the supernatural into real life by calling on the supreme power or presence in a way that brings reassurance and conviction to the people performing the ritual. In order to



enable lay people to approach the supernatural, the sacred ceremony is directed by a religious leader.

Anthropologists recognize three types of rituals. The first type includes rituals associated with the life cycle, (birth and naming of the child, initiation rites, marriage, death, etc.), repentance, marking special events, and pilgrimage. The second type of rituals are associated with crises in life, such as healing, significant decisions or disasters. The third type of rituals are related to the human needs for order and identity (marking birth dates, public ceremonies and ancestral traditions). Rituals are often performed in specified places and involve actions that help “move” people from the ordinary, or worldly life, to a sacred place (for example, by removing one’s shoes). After being taken to a sacred place, the people feel they are equipped with something that can help them overcome the daily challenges they face (Moreau, Netland & Engen, 2000:836)

The above definition highlights three things related to rituals. The first is that the goal of any ritual is to deal appropriately with the supernatural and/or restore the relationship between the supernatural and the natural. Secondly, rituals are performed to meet some need of the people performing the ritual. Finally, there are rituals for almost every important issue or event.

Plato divided people into three groups. Philosophers and leaders were designated as superior, while the middle class consisted of traders and soldiers. The lowest group were the farmers and other commoners. In terms of religion, however, Plato identified just two groups, namely the philosophers who relate to God through words of prayer, and the common people who relate to God through ceremonies (Subagya, 1981:121).

Mircea Eliade (1956) has also divided humans into two groups, namely the traditional and modern. Those designated traditional open themselves to sacred experiences while modern humans are generally closed to sacred experience. Traditional societies place themselves within the natural surroundings and seek to maintain harmony with the natural world around them through specific ceremonies (Pépin, 1987:20–32).

Using the above descriptions, Indonesians in general would be labelled common by Plato and traditional or religious by Eliade. According to the latter, a traditional society has a belief in the existence of fixed rules that humans must follow in order to have contentment and satisfaction in life. If humans violate the rules they will be punished (Subagya, 1981:114–15).

This belief is demonstrated through rites and ceremonies. Ceremonies include symbolic behaviours that reinforce or restore the natural order, and places man and his actions within the rules. In rites, words, prayers and gestures are used. Abandoning these ceremonial rites damages human relationships and order, resulting in punishment being meted out on humanity from heaven in the form of natural disasters, epidemics, earthquakes, long droughts and other calamities. Ceremonies that involve many people empowered to renew the world, preserved places, and a goal of restoration of the natural order, will also restore the whole community (Subagya, 1981:120). In Javanese culture, one core ritual is a joint celebration called slametan. This ceremony is carried out to mark specific parts of the life cycle; on holy days; when moving house; or at certain stages in the harvest cycle. The goal is to offer gifts to the spirits, as well as being a means to strengthen kinship links. The food served at a slametan is always specially prepared with dishes symbolizing particular religious concepts (Geertz, 1993:77).

Rites are patterns of religious and social meaning. If a rite is not done properly, then religious sense and social relations are disturbed. Geertz (1993) recounts the death of a man named Paijan in “Modjokuto” (a fictional town based on a real village in East Java). For Paijan, the usual death ritual cannot be carried out because Paijan was a member of Permai, an anti-Islamic social movement. Modin, the religious leader who was supposed to conduct the death ritual, refused to do so because he thought Paijan’s religious stance was unclear. This incident greatly shook the family, and also the local community, illustrating how meaningful the observance of such rituals are for the community (Geertz, 1993:84–95).

The author remembers a case a dozen years ago when a church funeral was denied a church member who had committed suicide. In accordance with church directives, a person who commits suicide cannot be given a church funeral. The same happens in Orthodoxy where the Orthodox



Church usually denies a Christian burial to a person who has committed suicide. Nonetheless if factors bearing on a case may become evident to a priest, he must share this information with the diocesan bishop who then considers the factors and make the decision concerning a funeral service. In the case alluded to, the family of the deceased tried to persuade the church officials involved to permit a church ceremony using two arguments. The first one was on behalf of the deceased, that their sins be absolved and they be received in heaven, and the second reason was to prevent loss of face for the family. When their request was not granted, the sad incident became a stain on the wider clan and was a reputational threat.

Rituals in Karo Culture

Traditional Karo people mark and interpret important events in life with a variety of ceremonial rituals. There is a ceremony to mark the seventh month of a pregnancy; a formal first cutting of the child's hair at the river; numerous ceremonies connected with weddings and deaths, as well as post-death ceremonies. If a citizen will be travelling, a ceremony can be held in order to assure a safe and successful trip. Particular community elders may provide a talisman for the traveler to carry during their journey. If someone is sick and not in their right mind, the local shaman can perform a healing ceremony (Sibarani, 2018).

A personal example of a traditional ritual to appease the spirits was experienced by the author when travelling to his hometown in the mount of Sinabung. The car went off the road and, although the car did not suffer significant damage, and all passengers survived without injury, the author's grandmother insisted on making rituals at the scene. She prepared offerings to be placed on the side of the road where the incident had happened, and she made supplication to the spirits present there that they not be offended by the disrespectful actions of the people involved in the accident.

The author has also observed certain rituals performed in connection with the planting and harvesting of rice. Prior to planting, the author's grandmother placed offerings at five points in the field. When asked about the purpose of the ceremony, his grandmother answered that it was tradition, and it has been proven to be correct and would help the rice grow well and be protected from pests.

If things happen that are not expected, the community responds with rituals. If it hasn't rained for a long time, a ritual to plea for rain will be prepared. During this ceremony, the shaman will lead and say a prayer for rain. While sprinkling water around, the shaman appeals for the water above to descend to earth in the form of rain.

In addition to the customary rituals mentioned above, Karo traditional communities also recognize sacred places, typically associated with unusual things, such as hot springs, mountain tops, or dark forests. Such places can bring pain and misfortune, but they can also be claimed as sources of protection and authority. Every village must have a sacred place. One sacred place that Karo people from all over regularly visit is the hot springs at the foot of Mount Sibayak, *Lau si Debuk-debuk*.

After the Sinabung eruption, many myths spread among the people. This includes a mystical story that annual ceremonies at the village sacred place serve to guard the power of the place, as well as to seek regional protection from disease and war (Lestari, et.al, 2016). The local shaman sings the ceremony, which includes asking the land and rice spirit families for a blessing. Through the ceremony, supernatural powers purify relationships within families and society. Kipp said : the powers can also kill those who dare to lie under oath (Kipp, 1996:240–41).

Simon Rae, who studied Karo culture 25 years ago, concluded that rituals performed by the Karo community were done in order to connect with ancestral spirits and gain power for an agreeable life. In every ritual performed there are two important elements, namely sacrifice and offering. Offerings are usual sufficient in rituals covering events of daily life, but rituals performed on Mount Sibayak and Mount Sinabung, or rituals to stop disasters require live animal sacrifices (Rae, 1994:48).



Rituals in the Holy Bible

The Old Testament description of the Hebraic religion gives a picture of a ritualistic religion in which the relationship between the people and God is prescribed by various rituals or ceremonies. H.H. Rowley, in his book "Worship in Ancient Israel", cites I. J. Cairns who noted that the rites typically included the use of scripture to communicate the main idea, so that the rite does not become an expression of magic/wizardry. Instead the spiritual meaning is deeply expressed in the cultic ritual.

The cultic expression does not guarantee an individual's personal devotion, but personal piety may be shallow and waver if it is not expressed through the community ritual. Hebrew worship conveyed Hebrew culture in its expression (Rowley, 1983:3). Rowley emphasized ceremony and motivation in rituals, and argued that both were equally important. Jeremiah spoke against worship carried out in accordance with rules and regulations but without the right motivation (e.g. Jeremiah 7). Thus even though a ritual may be performed correctly, it is rejected by God. Instructions for the various ceremonies to be executed by Aaron and his descendants were given by God. Eli's sons, however, ignored these regulations; the ritual was subsequently rejected by God, and they themselves were punished.

During the time of the Patriarchs, rituals were carried out simply and individually. Rituals were performed when a person sought after God or met with a messenger of God. For example, Abraham, on being visited by the angel of God, prepared a special ceremony of thanksgiving to God for the encounter. The ritual was not performed out of fear, but in honour to God who appeared to him (Genesis 18:1-33) (Harianto et.al., 2023).

Beginning with the Exodus, the rituals associated with worship began to be put in order and carried out in community. The people of Israel were required to hold particular rituals on holy days. If the rituals were not observed, it was understood there could be unfavourable consequences for the people. In addition, there were regular offerings of sacrifices and first fruits of the land, as well as other ritual demands prescribed in the law. Three times a year a very large ritual celebration was held (Rowley, 1983:34). If a given rite had been clearly established, the regulations concerning that right could not be ignored simply because the worshippers were sincere or filled with regret. On the other hand, ritualistic activity without a genuine spiritual attitude were of no use (Rowley, 1983:189).

Mawene (2015), examined four elements of Hebrew religious rituals, namely the buildings, holidays, sacrifices and songs used in worship. He concluded that the ritual pattern of the Israelites, in all four elements, showed inculturation, that is similarities with ritual patterns in surrounding cultures. Inculturation means the adoption of local forms of ritual that are given new meanings, or the creation of new rituals based on what is commonly practiced by surrounding communities (Mawene, 2015:64–81).

Mawene's conclusions are the same as those of Legrand (2000) who examined not only Old Testament Hebraic worship inculturation, but also inculturation observed in the New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul. He concluded that the biblical record is neither an account simply dropped from heaven, nor was it recorded in isolation from the surrounding culture of the time. Inculturation in the Bible varies (Legrand, 2000:xvi). This means that the Old Testament rituals may not have been much different from the rituals performed by the nations around Israel. Rituals are performed so the congregation/worshippers connect with God in order to safeguard life, and show deference to God who gives life to all people. Rituals are performed for all important events.

With respect to Old Testament prayer, Karman (2013) stresses the importance of posture, in addition to the attitude of the heart. He noted that bodily movements in Israelite prayer rituals were quite consistent, including standing prayer, stretching arms upwards, and bowing. All of these gestures would have had a symbolic meaning. Holding your hands up was a symbol of openness to receive God's help, while bending forward showed an attitude of humility before God Almighty. When Solomon built the Temple, it did not mean God was then locked up in a building that mankind had made. God allowed His name to be associated with a specific place on earth so that there could be a relationship between earth, and heaven where He lives (Karman, 2013:194–199).



According to Stambaugh and Balch (1997), the early Christians systematically rejected the vocabulary of pagan cults, refusing to use terms such as temples, priests, or sacrifices, other than in reference to Jesus himself. They were careful about using vocabulary suggestive of mystery cults. The aim was to give a more accurate picture of reality than the religious groups around them (Stambaugh & Balch, 1986:168,177).

However, the words of the Lord Jesus to the Samaritan woman, that the time would come for people to worship God neither in Gerizim nor in Jerusalem (John 4: 21), can be interpreted to mean God can be worshiped on other mountains or in other places. The Lord Jesus Himself said that if there were two or three people, who believed in Him, gathered in worship, then He was present at that place too (Matthew 18: 20).

Contextual Theology

Contextual theology was introduced in the 1970s in response to struggles faced by churches in Asia. Asian churches began to realize that traditional theology was not able to provide adequate answers to many of the challenges they were facing. This is a theology in dialogue with two realities: the experience of the past as recorded in Holy Scripture and the traditions of churches and the context in which Christian theologians live.

Unlike traditional theology, contextual theology provides a needed space in which to consider the context of both reader and source. The “Asian context” is not an object, so to speak, within theology, but rather part of the background that needs to be considered as the scriptures are studied in search of answers to typical Asian problems. Two particular Asian issues that the church needs to address are extreme poverty, and the rich ethnic and religious diversity found in this region of the world. The church needs to bring Asian cultural realities into the process of building a contextual theology that is relevant to Asian problems.

Bevan (2002) provides a simple definition of contextual theology as considering culture, history, forms of thought, etc., together with scripture and church traditions as legitimate foundations for building theology (Bevans, 2002:2). A. A. Yewangoe, in the forward of Eben’s (2006) book, *“Pemberita Firman Pencinta Budaya”* (Preaching the Word, Loving the Culture) emphasized that the difference between traditional theology and contextual theology is in the placement of the context. Context must be examined carefully and honestly, listening to the actual reality of the situation and not judging a local culture through the lens of another culture (Timo, 2006:xiii).

The Manila Consultation Workshop Report (2012) recognized that Asian religious traditions generally maintain a deep sense of kinship between mankind and nature. In these traditions, humans approach nature rationally, intuitively, mystically and aesthetically rather than analytically. There is a coherent relationship between nature and mankind. People accept themselves as being part of the natural world that sustains and supports human life. In fact, God is understood to be seen in nature, not outside of it. That is why humans can show respect for God through their response to nature (Elwood, 2006:90–1).

Eben (2005), in introducing the importance of the local cultural milieu in building contextual theology, argues that culture is a sign of God’s presence in our midst. Eben comes from South-eastern Indonesia (NTT), in particular Timor, and in the context of Timorese culture, he notes the way the local culture and religion serve as a sign of God’s presence (Timo, 2005, viii). In another book, he states that the God worshiped by his ancestors on Mount Tunbes is the God of the Lord Jesus Christ (Timo, 2006:45). Timo places local cultural contexts on the same level as the Bible and church traditions. His rationale is that theology is the study of God, and because there are ideas of God in every culture, culture is worth exploring alongside scriptures as a guide for God’s people. Previously, the pioneer of contextual theology in Asia, C.S. Song, argued in a similar way that culture is a kind of theology in that culture mirrors the image of God. According to Song, all cultures in the world contain the presence of God (Song, 1999:58).

Bevans discusses six models for contextual theology, namely modern translation, anthropological, praxis, synthesis, transcendental, and counter cultural. Each model has advantages and



disadvantages, so there is no one model that is superior to the others. The key issue is the relevance of the model (Bevans, 2002:139–40). They are the Translation model, Anthropological model, Praxis model, Synthetic model, Transcendental model, Countercultural model. The latter one is the one alluded to in this study.

Some ideas to support Karonese Christian communities

When there are natural disasters, collective prayers are important as they offer a deep sense of unity, strength, and solace (Congar, 1969; Nicolaidis, 2021). Communal prayer allows believers to seek God's guidance, state their apprehensions, and find hope in God's divine protection. Rituals that acknowledge suffering, such as prayers of lament, also offer an emotional catharsis, that permits Karonese Christians to express their grief, frustration, and their deep sadness, while also then trusting in God's plan for their renewal. Memorial services are important as they allow the community to mourn collectively for victims, as they remember the lost, and find comfort in Christian teachings about the afterlife and resurrection. The Holy Eucharist (Holy Communion) is essential as it brings spiritual renewal and reminds all including Karonese Christians of Jesus' sacrifice and God's care (Nicolaidis, 2021). The Holy Eucharist is the very centre of Christian life, and the path by which all believers are fed by God's grace and tender mercy. "At the Divine Liturgy, the Church is continuously changed from a human community into the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the holy People of God" (Nicolaidis 2021:1)

Sunday worship services and special prayer meetings, build a sense of true belonging (Neal, 2014; When faced with natural disasters, the community can strive to help each other spiritually and practically, reinforcing their social links as Christians. Christian symbols used during rituals can also serve as visible reminders of hope and resurrection through Jesus Christ for his nation of believers (Nicolaidis, 2010). Such symbols assist people to be focussed on God's promises during difficult times in life. Church leaders should of course be offering counseling and pastoral care, and helping people to process any trauma of posed through natural disasters. Special services of thanksgiving can be conducted for the community in order to expresses their collective gratitude for God's intervention and His assistance. By integrating examples of such rituals, Karonese Christians can draw upon their faith to cope with the emotional, physical, and spiritual traumas and challenges that come with natural disasters. This will also foster a sense of courage, harmony, and resilience.

Conclusion

Through rituals and ceremonies, traditional societies meet with the Almighty. Since the community understands that natural wonders can reveal God, the ritual worship of the Almighty is often done in places of striking natural beauty or power, like a large river, a high mountain, or some other significant location. Rituals in the Old Testament are also a means by which the people meet with God. In sacrificial rituals the people expressed their gratitude for God's goodness, alongside demonstrating their respect and obedience. Indeed, the form of the ritual and the motivation of the worshiper are two interrelated elements. If the form meets the requirements but is not offered with a sincere heart, the ritual is useless. Similarly, relying on sincerity without following the prescribed order is also considered inadequate. Solomon realized that building a temple did not mean that God would be contained within that temple. God cannot be confined to a place provided by humans. God is everywhere in all that He created.

The Lord Jesus stated that the time will come when people will no longer worship Him on Mount Gerizim and Mount Zion. This can be interpreted that God can now be worshiped in other places, on other mountains like Mount Tunbes in Timor, or Mount Sinabung in the Karo district. The Lord Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the law (Matthew 5: 17). If the Lord Jesus did not negate the traditions of the Israelites, surely the traditions of the Karo people are not negated either. The Apostle Paul taught that everyone should stay in the same "condition" they were when they were called by God (1 Corinthians 7:20). Thus if someone followed Jewish traditions before becoming a Christian he may still follow those traditions after choosing to follow Jesus. Likewise, someone coming to faith in Jesus from a Gentile background and traditions may still continue in those



traditions. This also means that Karonese Christians are still Karo people; they have not become like Westerners. If the traditional way for Karo people to encounter God is through ritual, rather than words favoured by philosophers, then Christian Karo people may continue to carry out meaningful cultural traditions and rituals. Thus, the Christian Karo people who live around Mount Sinabung can worship at the foot of that mountain, requesting God to end the eruptions of Mount Sinabung. The people who carry out these great ceremonies are not individuals, but rather the church as a religious institution.

The main function of the church is to lead the people of God, His nation, in worship of God and to demonstrate the reality of God in the community through social and humanitarian work to support all brothers and sisters in times of crisis. Any rituals performed by the church at the foot of Mount Sinabung do not guarantee an end to any eruption, nor that life for the community will return to normal. However, the ceremony is one way the church demonstrates its role and responsibility to serve as a link between the community and God in a way that is understood by the people. At the very least, the people cannot accuse the church of damaging and destroying community traditions handed down from the ancestors, neither will people seek to carry out such rituals in secret. Even Jesus Christ was influenced by cultures in the Holy Land during his earthly period and he used parables that presented the Kingdom of God to the people based on things the people of that culture understood and could identify with with more easily, and all was clearly towards their spiritual enhancement.

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