

RELIGION, SUANGGI, AND SUICIDE A CASE STUDY IN THE CITY OF AMBON FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

During 2017-2019 a few cases of suicide amongst Christian teenagers in the city of Ambon have been linked to the influence of “suanggi” that has connotations of being the representation of an evil supernatural power. By using the qualitative research method with a case study approach, the article is focused on the religious reactions of the Christian community in their understanding and rationalization of these two phenomena. Data is collected through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and personal interviews. All collected qualitative data are analyzed by social hermeneutical analysis. The results of the study have shown that: (1) Social change that occurred amongst the people of Ambon has implications in the shift of traditional order of living values, at the same time clashes between the custodians of cultural traditions and morality (church) have occurred. (2) Within the Ambonese community, religion does not only symbolize certain systems of belief, but also becomes the institution that provides a place for the communal spirit and protects the shared morality through its teachings and the practice of its rituals. (3) The phenomena of suicide amongst teenagers in Ambon, the circulation of information concerning the influence of “suanggi”, and the reactive response of the Christian community reflects the clash between the insistence for social change amongst the urban communities.

Keywords: *Suicide, suicidal behavior, social religiosity, suanggi, teenagers*

INTRODUCTION

This research article focuses on several cases of suicide that took place in some residential areas within the city, in the suburbs of Ambon and outside of Ambon Island (Porto, Saparua Island) between 2019-2020. It was observed that there were six cases of suicide – reported by local online media – carried out by teenagers aged 16-20 years: one young male (20 years old), one high school student (18 years old), four students (under 20 years old) studying at a state university in Ambon. The modus used was committing suicide by hanging her/himself with the plastic rope, belt or a dog's leash. Only one left a handwritten note behind, such as a suicide case in Saparua Island.

While the others, as far as could be monitored in the media, did not leave any message behind so that the reason why they committed suicide cannot be determined. Several assumptions concerning the reason for committing suicide can be made from information that has been gleaned from the media, such as the pressures due to academic demands, financial problems, breakup and conflict with parents.

Although it is realized that there are also internal psychological deciding factors, this research is limited to looking at the socio-cultural and religious factors that support suicidal behavior. The main assumption is based on the perspective that individual psychological

factors are not isolated segments. Rather, they are influenced determinately by socio-cultural factors, especially amongst a community with communal characteristics that are constructed through the patron-client relationship which is experiencing a shift in moral values as a result of drastic social changes as those taking place in the city of Ambon.

During the preliminary observations concerning these suicide cases, besides the suspected reason, other interesting information came to light that this suicidal behavior was driven by a magical power that was defined by the community as *suanggi*. Information spread orally concerning those who committed suicide, heard haunted whispers that are thought to have made them unaware of what they were doing when committed suicide. In one case, the community was haunted by the fear of a *suanggi* that was roaming around their houses so that the church (the minister and elders) took the initiative to pray and hold a special service at a specific point on the main road of the village to expel the black magic of the *suanggi*.

It is more interesting to observe the *suanggi* phenomenon because, within the context of post-conflict Ambon where people live in segregated areas based on religious identity (Christian and Muslim), the commotion concerning *suanggi* only appears occurred in the Christian areas (Tawiri, Batumeja, Kudamati). It has been linked with the suicide behavior pattern of some teenagers which is regarded as abnormal by the community. Various versions of an issue appeared in the news concerning the figure “Wa Una” as a *suanggi*, a performer of black magic who targeted young people and caused them to commit suicide.¹ Such

¹ Within *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (online) <https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/Suanggi>, there are three definitions of “*suanggi*”: (1) an owl; (2) ancient beliefs of the Aru tribe; (3) evil spirits believed by the Belu tribe as always wandering about preying on humans. In the context of this research, *suanggi* was generally seen by the Ambonese as a manifestation of a “demon” and “a person who uses the powers of black magic”. These two understandings were interchangeable. See also <https://www.molucastimes.com/2016/05/suanggi-hantu-yang-paling-ditakuti-di.html>

accusations were circulated followed by the status posted in the form of clarification from the family of someone whose name Wa Una.²

This research focuses on two questions: (1) What were the socio-cultural and religious conditions that caused the increase in suicidal behavior amongst Christian teenagers in the city of Ambon? (2) How does the Christian community understand the phenomena of suicidal behavior from the perspective of religious studies? These research questions are the bridge to reach the research purpose, namely (1) Getting a profound understanding about the interconnectedness of social reality and religious conditions that stimulate suicidal behavior among Ambonese Christian teenagers in the city of Ambon; and (2) Mapping the phenomenon of suicidal behavior as one vital contradictory issue among religious believers whose faith in God and the tendency to opt suicidal mode of death, especially amongst teenagers.

This research article has a main contribution to encourage study on suicidal behavior amongst teenagers who live in a context of urban society such as in the city of Ambon. Academically, its fundamental contribution is to elaborate the interconnection of theoretical issues and empirical reality as a constructive discourse in religious studies perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Suicide is a complicated phenomenon. Several experts in psychological theory, such as Shneidman and Farberow, also Menninger state that a person who tends towards suicidal behavior really wants to live and die at the same time. They do not realize that they have suicidal tendencies, or rather are more passive than active (Maskill 2005: 4).

Clinard and Meier (1975: 497) define suicide as “the destruction of oneself – self-killing or self-

² “Wa Una” is a name that is usually used amongst one non-Maluku ethnic group that have lived among and become part of the people of Maluku but still holds on strongly to signs of their own identity (for example, local language). The name refers to a female figure.

murder in the legal sense". Retterstol (1993: 2) gives a more detailed definition:

An act with a fatal outcome, that is deliberately initiated and performed by the deceased him-or herself, in the knowledge or expectation of its fatal outcome, the outcome being considered by the actor as instrumental in bringing about desired changes in consciousness and/or social conditions.

However, the association of suicide and religion was inspired by the work of Emile Durkheim, *Suicide* (Durkheim 2002). He noted and tried to explain facts that the Protestants had higher suicide rates than the Roman Catholics (Durkheim 2002: xiv), while the Muslims had lower suicide rates than the Protestants (Lester 2006: 41).

Since then, there are a huge number of researchers who produced articles concerning with religion and suicide behavior. Some scholars on this field scrutinized the so-called self-report of religiosity to examine a protective factor against suicide behavior. Lester's research, for example, demonstrated the significance whether the counselors can use the patients' religiosity to reduce a death risk due to suicide (Dervic et al. 2004; Lester 2017; Amato and Lombardo 2019).

Another scholar, Jennifer Kyle (2019: 250) conducted a cross-cultural suicide research about spiritual faith as a protective factor among diverse youth groups. Her objective was to examine spiritual faith as a predictor of suicidal ideation within diverse group of youth or students, which took various racially and religiously sample, including Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. Similar research was conducting by Mehmet Eskin whose writing on the association of religion to suicidal behavior, attitudes and psychological distress in 5,572 students from 12 countries by means of a self-report questionnaire (Eskin et al. 2019: 6).

Grace E. Tetey (2014: 33-42) developed critical study on the association of religiosity and suicidal ideation by using population-based sample of adolescents in the United

States in her dissertation. She sought to explore the relationship between religiosity (religious affiliation, service attendance, prayer, perceived importance of religion) and suicidal ideation of adolescents. Using multivariate analyses, she found indication that adolescents' religiosity was negatively correlated with suicidal ideation. However, the selected risk factors were positively correlated with suicidal ideation among adolescent participants.

Another angle to understand the association between religion and suicide was also used by Omomia Austin in the context of Nigeria. He applied religious, philosophical, historical and sociological research methodology to scrutinize the role of religion in contemporary suicide advocacy (Austin 2017: 34-56).

Generally, suicide theories can be classified into three main clusters (Maskill et al. 2005: 5):

- a. Biological theories state that physiological factors, biochemistry or genetics have an important influence as the beginning of suicide, combined with environmental factors.
- b. Psychological and psychiatric theories on the condition of thoughts, psyche or feelings and beliefs about the world of the individual who wants to or does commit suicide.
- c. Sociological theories focus on the significance of the social environment, social relations and other social, economic, cultural factors in studying the cause of suicide. Two types of empirical research in this theory: [1] Type one has a more quantitative and statistic approach that is developed through their works such as moral statistic group and Emile Durkheim; [2] Type two is more of a qualitative approach, ethno-methodological or interpretative, such as Jack Douglas' construction of social meanings (Douglas 1970: 247-248).

This article provides new angle to observe the suicide phenomenon by using contextual lens of religious studies in which the suicide cases are

related to social and cultural notions as they are comprehended by the society whose practice their religious faith.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social Integration and Social Regulation

Sociologically, the uniqueness of Durkheim's approach can be found in his rejection of important non-social factors in determining the variations in the suicide rate. The variations in the suicide rate in modern society are mainly determined by the social environment. Social conditions of society public morals and psychological climate of a society can increase or decrease the individual tendency to react to various problems and sufferings by committing suicide (Hawton and Heerington 2000: 1-6).

Individual behavior is strongly influenced by the way social and collective life is organized. Every society has its own set of rules, values, and norms—“social facts” or “institutions” – that have the power to limit individual behavior (Maskill et al. 2005: 9). Durkheim argued about two forces that normally maintain the social order and prevent social chaos. Firstly, social integration, that binds an individual to a society through the norms and social values of a group. Secondly, social regulation, that limits the desires and aspirations of mankind that have the unlimited potential to define the aims and specific meaning that want to be reached together.

An imbalance between social integration and social regulation can be the cause of suicide, which Durkheim explained as follows: (1) Excessive individualism, where a person is distant from close relations with the other, becomes the basis for the rise of “egoistic suicide” (symptoms of inadequate social integration). (2) Anomie (or a condition without regulations), a situation where codes of behaviour that previously controlled society behaviour are no longer applied, becomes the basis for the rise of “anomic suicide” (symptoms of inadequate social regulation).

Variations in the suicide rate between and within modern society reflects the degree to which various social institutions within society promote or remove egoism or anomie. Durkheim also explains two types of suicide: (1) Altruistic suicide is used in the situation where there is a fading of the power of individuation (excessive social integration), including suicide based on religious motives (martyr) or a *kamikaze* pilot. (2) Fatalistic suicide is used in relation to excessive social regulation, including the suicides of slaves, prisoners or others who live in an environment where every movement made is controlled and observed (Maris 2000: 519-550).

The main urge to commit of suicide is really the impact of modernization, including the growth of urbanization, industrialization, secular education and capitalism. The increasing level in the risk of anomic and egoistic suicide is because of the subordination of the individual by the life of the group, the decline of religious beliefs and practices together, the weakening of family relationships and sudden changes in the life of society. All contribute to the rise of collective sadness.

Interpretative Approach

This approach pioneered by Max Weber and also adherents of phenomenology. This approach accentuated the description and careful analysis at the micro and macro levels of the social environment, cultural, and interpersonal characteristics within which a person becomes involved in suicidal behavior. The focus is on the endeavors to understand the subjective meanings given by society to the actions and social experience, by using information that has been gathered concerning the life experiences of someone who intends to or has committed suicide (for instance, suicide note, case history, diary) (Maskill et al. 2005: 21).

It became famous in part because of criticism of the traditional statistics approach, which Giddens (1971) mentioned “have very definite limitations in the sort of knowledge they

can provide. By their very nature they deal in abstractions, and discard the particular”.

Jack Douglas (1970: 133) explained this approach as follows:

... in order to determine and analyse the social meanings of suicide, and thence, to be able to determine what causal relationship exist between these meanings and the various types of suicidal actions, sociologist must develop scientific methods of observing, describing and analysing communicative actions concerning real-world cases of suicide.

By opposing Durkheim and the other theorists, Douglas (1970: 248) stated that the way to define suicide and the way of gathering data concerning suicide is strongly socially and culturally determined. The result being, “objective” suicide statistics in reality experience systematic biases for several social groups (for example, those who live in different countries at different times, people who are from different religions, groups with different socio-economic backgrounds and so on) and because of these differences these statistics are not valid. As Atkinson argues that “the mode of death provides the investigators with guidance as to what further evidence should be sought, and in many cases provides a preliminary categorization which is increasingly confirmed as the enquiries continue.” (Atkinson 1983: 120)

Religion, Suicide and Suanggi

In the cultural context of non-Western society, the world perspective that is opposition-binary and dichotomous is not totally acceptable. Opposition-binary is understood not as two opposing poles rather as a cycle or spiral that moves by connecting with each other and giving meaning to each other. Goodness and evil, happiness and suffering, success and failure, life and death, all are understood as a spiral contact of profane and sacred or private and public. Religion – with all its belief systems, symbols and ethical values – cannot be seen as an entity that is locked up in the private and sacred domains

only, but seeps and permeates the public and profane domains. Conversely, public and profane domains are arenas that are open expressions of religious symbolism that are given communal meaning although they are marked by various conflicts of interpretation.

In the lens of anthropology of religion, discussing human beings in their culture must also involve the dimension of belief or religion. Religious belief is a belief that directly or indirectly is related to someone who possesses the power that is greater than humans and animals, with whom human beings can maintain a relationship (interaction and transactional), and which can influence the life of human beings for better or for worse. Religious beliefs are connected with supernatural entities (Eller 2007: 30).

In the dimension of his religiosity, human beings imagine and are also controlled by the said imagination. In this imagination, supernatural entities are personified through various names and characters as “the good” and “the bad”. The belief systems of the major religions, such as Christianity and Islam, know the various characters of these supernatural entities, such as “angel”, “evil spirit”, “devil”, “demon” and others. The same is true in the belief systems of indigenous religions (Eller 2007: 34-52).

In this case, *suanggi* cannot just be regarded as a “rumor” or “diversion” or “imagined phantom of depression” such as the assumption of some people that regard the cases of suicide amongst Christian teenagers in Ambon. It is an expression of religiosity that reveals the layers that have been intertwined in the belief system of the Ambonese people. The dimensions of indigenous belief are woven together with the principles of Christian belief that have been formed through the historical, social, political, economical and cultural processes of society. It is believed that the existence and power of *suanggi* is “present” and/or “made present” as one pattern of rationalization of the Eastern society that sees the universe as an existential spiral that moves forward connecting certain critical points in the life of mankind. The

power of the *suanggi* is feared at the same time controlled by mankind in order to fulfil the desires and interests of mankind both individually or socially (Bartels 2017: 277-285).

Dhavamony (1995: 62) shows four differences between a sorcerer and a witch: (1) Sorcerers consciously and deliberately hurt others because his actions can be controlled and brought to a halt, while it is possible that witches are unaware of evil lives that they are living. Whereas Daniel Offiong (1991: 158) in his research in Nigeria, demonstrated different findings. (2) The anti-social actions of a sorcerer are for personal motives while those of a witch are more because it has been inherited or because of early habits. (3) A sorcerer uses magic for evil, while a witch only can use magic if his personality is suitable. (4) A sorcerer usually uses special materials; while a witch does not usually use these materials (Dhavamony 1995: 63).

According to Stevens (Lehmann and Myers 1985: 201), imagination and the personification of the sorcerer and the witch in the context of urban society is influenced by a high level of stress – “that allegations of witchcraft increase with the intensity of social stress.” This point of view is in line with what was conveyed by Moody (Lehmann and Myers 1985: 232) who observed a satanic cult in San Francisco.

Thus, the emergence of the figure of Wa Una can be understood as a reflection of the social restlessness of the urban society in Ambon and religious inner-feelings that need rationalizing in order to increasingly confirm its own religious beliefs through the dichotomy of the power of evil and the power of good.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is in the realm of humanities research within the frame of a religious studies perspective that tries to obtain qualitative data concerning the correlation of religion and suicidal behavior amongst the Christian teenagers in Ambon. In this case, religion is not just seen as a personal matter but more of a social expression

of religious beliefs of an individual. As a social expression then the beliefs and religious actions of an individual influence and are influenced in a dialectic manner, that forms socio-cultural and religious habits that are confirmed as social norms.

From the perspective of social norms, suicidal behavior is often regarded as deviance of social norms, especially concerning the concept of live and death as a divine decree. Those who commit suicide are regarded as experiencing mental disorder that is brought on by multiple factors: personal and social. But the accentuation towards personal (psychological) factors is more dominant so that other social environment factors are often ignored.

The research uses a case study method starting with preliminary observation on series of suicide cases in the city of Ambon. Researchers collected some news from online sources and printed newspapers pertinent to the suicide cases. Selective reading was carried out concerning information on cases of suicide reported in several online media, including *Rakyat Maluku* (February 13, 2019; February 22, 2019; February 14, 2020), *Kabar Timur* (February 29, 2020), *TribunNews* (March 6, 2020) and *Tagar.id* (April 7, 2020). Those cases were classified in terms of actors, motives, and mode of death.

As a second step, researchers attempted to confirm some related news and dug up more information by conducting the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with a group of the church youth organization or *Angkatan Muda Gereja Protestan Maluku* (AM-GPM). The gathering of primary qualitative data was carried out with the AM-GPM Tiberias III Branch, Palungan Kasih Congregation, Riang Tawiri, North Ambon Island Parish, conducted online interviews with several key informants who are representative of Christian pastors, AM-GPM officials at the branch level and executive board members, students and teenagers who are not students. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and through the *WhatsApp* application. An amount of secondary

information was compiled through *Facebook* social media in the form of written opinions and online discussion.

Data in the form of words, direct statements, and opinion were sorted into categories according to the main variables in this research; they are “religion”, “suanggi”, and “suicide”. The *suanggi* variable is placed here as a contemporary phenomenon that is linked with a number of cases and has gained serious attention from the general public, especially amongst the Christians. Several cases of suicide do not directly link *suanggi* as the cause of the suicide. However, it still needs to be taken into account as a comparison related to the pattern and motive of suicide among Ambonese Christian teenagers in the last year (2019-2020).

The data was analyzed qualitatively following some steps. First, researchers tried to be familiar with the data by listening to the recordings for several times. Second, each recording was transcribed verbatim and read for several times to obtain the main points. Next, referring to the objective of the study, several main points from different transcribed interviews were highlighted, looking for the logic interconnectedness among empirical variables, and all those interconnected data were explained narratively, as well as interpreted by using the social hermeneutics framework to understand (*verstehen*) the meaning behind the suicide phenomenon and its motives among teenager group in Ambon. Religious studies perspective here are using to consider a suicide phenomenon among Ambonese teenagers through an interdisciplinary paradigm related to the role and meaning of religion within the society, and how the society constructs the meaning of suicide as part of the social dynamics at a certain time and space.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Social Dynamics of the City of Ambon

Based on his historical analysis about Ambonese society since the seventeenth century, together with the increasing power of the Dutch

East India Company (VOC) entrenched in Ambon, Knaap (1991: 105-128) called the society of Ambon as the city of migrants. Since then, Ambon has experienced the ebb and flow of continuous social, political, economic and cultural changes (Chauvel 1990). The most revolutionary change in the order of social, political, economics and cultural relations occurred at the end of twentieth century at the time of social-religious conflict in Maluku (1999-2005) (Al Qurtuby 2016; Amirrachman 2017).

The conflict experience has become a collective memory settled in the structure of social consciousness of the Ambonese society up until the present. Besides this, segregated areas based on religious identity have become an “icon” of the post conflict social community of Ambon (Leirissa 2004).

The process of the hardening of religious identity cannot be avoided and just continues because people spend more time living in the same exclusive environment (the same religion). In the segregated residential areas, people spend more time in a living environment that is homogenous and exclusive. Particularly, the majority Christian young people do not have any experience of interaction in an environment with people of different identities and disable to articulate their language, religion, and social identity in varied life situations. Their social environment is only limited to Christian groups and social peer groups (hobby groups, sports clubs, art groups). Internal conflict occurs mainly in the form of competition of interests in fighting for professionalism resources and opportunities in the formal sector of government bureaucracy (to become a civil servant) that are increasingly shrinking (Iwamony, Gaspersz, and Souisa 2019: 84).

Meanwhile the informal economic sector is mainly dominated by groups of young Muslim entrepreneurs, who are progressive and able to build more extensive business networks on a national level. Christian young people – with increasingly growing numbers – are only able to

bunch together in order to snatch the small number of opportunities that are left of the informal sector, such as becoming a motorbike taxi driver, *Grab* motorbike/car, rickshaw, barbershop, food-truck, and at most the unemployed spending time drinking alcohol or cast their lot in becoming drug suppliers/users.

The living environment in various urban areas is crowded which increasingly become a point of contact of conflict between individuals and between families, between districts in the city centre (for example: *Batugantung Dalam* and *Kampung Ganemu*). Small box type houses that are crammed together side by side with more than one family living in each house, so that teenagers spend most of their time out doors hanging out (playing cards and drinking alcohol) on the pavement or in front of the alley. Recently, Ambonese teenage motorbike gangs (Christian and Muslim) have been formed. These motorbike gangs occupy certain locations in the city centre and challenge each other to race every night. Some of them have lost their lives or become invalid because of traffic accidents.

Teenage mixing outside of the home seems to be increasingly out of control so that the level of teenage pregnancies has increased even though they are of school age (Junior High School and Senior High School). If that is the case, the usual consequence that has to be accepted both by the girls and boys is that they are expelled from school. They (and their child) become the financial burden of their parents again, who have limited wages, while for them to find good jobs is impossible because they are without qualifications of minimal skills. The way out taken by some parents is to buy a motorbike by using credit so that their son can get a daily wage by working as a motorbike taxi driver.

On the other hand, the number of motorbike taxi drivers has increased rapidly for a small city like Ambon that makes an increasing competition in seizing customers and home bases so that they are susceptible to conflict between groups. The sharp rise in the growth in the population

whether natural growth or local migration and urbanization also has added to the complexities of urban life in this city.

Several residential areas near the campuses in Ambon are getting crowded because students from islands outside of Ambon are thronging there to find lodgings. Social relations are becoming complicated and thus susceptible to conflict due to the clash of cultures and traditions of these students who have lodgings there. Transactional relationships increasingly dominate the domain of private and public communication, for example, between the owners of the student accommodation and the student tenants concerning the payment of rent and so on.

Public spaces for public activities of the people of the city, especially for teenagers are minimal and are centered at Pattimura Square with three basket ball pitches and two volley ball pitches. The Merdeka Square grass pitch that previously was used to play football, from 2019 has been covered with paving-blocks and can only be used as a jogging track, physical exercises *en masse* and flag raising ceremonies. Only one football pitch is available at the *Mandala Remaja* Stadium in Karang Panjang. Adequate public facilities are not available in the residential areas of urban Ambon. The city government has built the public area of *Pantai Wainitu* but apparently it has not been maintained and has only become a place for the young people from the areas of Wainitu and Talake to hang out.

The condition of community life of the urban society in Ambon since the mid of March 2020 has been made even more difficult by the corona pandemic virus or COVID-19. This pandemic has become a global threat, which includes Indonesia and its regions. The provincial and city governments issued instructions to dismiss educational activities in all schools and campuses, limit working hours and personnel in government and private offices, and applying a strict health protocol at the airport and the harbour. All of this was carried out to break the chain in the spreading of the corona virus.

But, on the other hand the restriction of all public activities has had an effect on the social-economic condition of school age teenagers and students. Before all this took place, most of their energy was poured into various activities at school/campus. But now with the appeals to “stay at home” and “work from home”, all activities take place at home and close by. Not all families are able to provide internet facilities (Wi-Fi) in their homes for the study online needs of their children who were at school or university. Especially for students in lodgings, internet is very expensive because they have to spend extra money besides money for their lodgings, transport and money for food that is budgeted each month by parents who live in the villages. While their needs for lectures online while they were in this virus corona “lockdown”, top up for Internet became a priority if they did not wanted to be regarded as skipping lectures or given academic sanctions.

Mystic-Theological Views about Suanggi and Suicide

Early information concerning the existence of “mysterious whispers” that was presumed to order a few young people to commit suicide (hang themselves) was obtained from FGD as the main part of the service of Tiberias III branch AM-GPM in Palungan Kasih church, GPM congregation in Riang, Tawiri, North Ambon Island Presbytery (Pietersz 2019). Restlessness started to being felt after several cases of suicide of young people had occurred in a row in Tawiri in five months. Data given at that time was that seven youngsters had died having hung themselves. Besides individual psychological factors and conditions of family life, there was information about those “mysterious whispers”. However, when further questions were asked, the informant could not give any further information concerning evidence of it. He only said that information as “hearsay” without giving any clarification of the truth. However, generally, all the FGD participants believed there is a mysterious power that they called the “power of Satan” that caused the suicidal behaviour of

the youngsters in Tawiri in a row within a short range of time and they all followed the same modus (hanging).

For some of the FGD participants, these incidents did not make sense and could not be explained rationally. The mapping of the problem was carried out during the FGD and finally boiled down to the assumption that the family background was not harmonious or broken-home, problems of the heart (break up), problems due to the economic crisis so that dropped out of university and problems related to the final task at university (relationship between lecturer and student related to guidance on thesis writing). But these are just assumptions because none of the participants had tried to find further information concerning the causes. Rumors were widely heard in the community that it was the work of “rope demon”. From many stories, they obtained a picture of a female devil who, travelled from residential area to residential area, to influence the young people to hang themselves.

There are three versions of the story concerning the origins of “rope demon” and why she targeted young people in Tawiri. The first version stated that the teenagers who committed suicide in Tawiri were members of the AB motorbike gang. They often hung out in certain places and drank alcohol. One day, perhaps because they were under the influence of alcohol, they raped a young woman who passed by the place where they were hanging out. This woman felt embarrassed because she felt violated and committed suicide by hanging herself with a rope. Then the spirit of the woman roamed around to take revenge on every member of the motorbike gang who had raped her. In a mysterious manner (whispers), she told them to hang themselves. The truth of this story needs to be checked further, but in reality those teenagers who died when they hanged themselves were members of that motorbike gang.

The second version stated that it was assumed the teenager members of the motorbike gang once used the *jailangkung* (similar to Ouija)

ritual to call on the spirit of the woman who had died when she had hung herself. Then they made a mistake in carrying out the ritual and/or they did not know how to return the woman's spirit to the spirit world so that she asked for a sacrifice to take the place of members of the motorbike in the same way that she died: hanging. The existence of the "rope demon" has not yet been dealt with so there is still a silent restlessness among the people of Tawiri, especially amongst the members of the motorbike gang.

The third version states that the teenager members of the motorbike gang often hung out and drank alcohol in an empty building that used to be the post office. It is thought that their activities disturbed the "spirit" of the empty building and it disturbed them with "mysterious whispers" that drove them to commit suicide (hanging).³

In the beginning with the deaths of around seven in a short period of time, many people only saw it as a problem of the people of Tawiri. Commotion concerning "rope demon" or *suanggi* occurred when teenager Remon Tomaso (RT, high school student) who lived in Bere-Bere, Batumeja Ambon also hung himself.⁴ After tracing the story behind this case, information was obtained that RT was a member of the AB motorbike gang that was based in Tawiri. A few days before he hung himself in his bedroom, he went to the home of the Tuhumena family to get a motorbike exhaust pipe. One of the children of the Tuhumena family called Brayen Tuhumena (BT), hung himself in February 2020. BT was also a member of the AB motorbike gang. RT took the exhaust pipe from the elder brother of BT.

Several days after the death of RT a teenager, who lives in Kudamati, was possessed by a

³ Information from RU (Chairman of the Tiberias III branch of AM-GPM, GPM Tawiri congregation).

⁴ Information from RL (Chairman Syalom branch of AM-GPM), that on 5th and 6th April 2020, evil spirits possessed 3 young people. Then on 7th April Remon Tomaso hung himself. This series of events are linked to disturbances caused by evil spirits or *suanggi* in that area so that the pastor and elders took action by holding a special service of prayer.

demon. After regained his senses, he said that RT was his friend in the motorbike gang. Before RT died by hanging himself, they went to BT's home in Tawiri to get an exhaust pipe. When they arrived back home from Tawiri in the middle of the night, he continues, he saw a woman asking for a ride, but RT did not take any notice and sped off on his motorbike. But in the middle of the journey, he saw the woman riding on the back of RT's motorbike. He himself was frightened but he could not do anything about it so he followed behind until they reached the city, then they went their separate ways.⁵ After the death of RT, the people who lived near him were haunted by fear of the presence of the *suanggi* so the pastor and elders of the congregation held a special service every night on the main road in Bere-Bere.

Several days later, there was a commotion in several places around Ambon concerning the presence of the *suanggi* that was travelling from residential area to residential area. It was believed that this *suanggi* originated from the "rope demon" in Tawiri who had entered the city. There was a commotion in several locations such as Kudamati, Benteng, Latuhalat, and Suli-Banda. The story, pictures, and video circulated on a massive scale by social media. So far this information that has been gathered is limited to stories from mouth to mouth and social media in various versions. Although this is the case, it is important to study the circulation of narrations about *suanggi* as part of a reflection of psychological and religious situation. There is a wide belief in the presence of these mysterious entities that causes mass anxiety that can be seen from the rumours concerning this matter. Various reflections of religious belief have been delivered in various opportunities such as sermons through the public address system (loudspeakers). Among all this commotion, a question arose in our mind: Why does it appear that there is not the same commotion or restlessness in other religious

⁵ There are 4 video clips recordings concerning the possession incident were circulated in a chain message through WA: 1 clip when the teenagers were possessed and 3 clips of testimony after they regained their senses.

community?

Generally, in the cultural thinking of the people, at least can be understood through various opinions related to the phenomena of suicide of young people, it seems that *suanggi* can be comprehended in two types of understanding: (1) as a magical force from the strength of the mysterious entities with evil *suanggi* characteristics that are often called a “demon” – in this case the “rope demon”; (2) a person who consciously or unconsciously (because it is passed down from one generation to the next in one extended family or clan) possesses and uses magical powers to damage others for the sake of the urges of controlled magic or certain personal aims. Rev. GL, a Protestant pastor, based on his experience working in a congregation in Southeast Maluku islands recounts his experience with *suanggi*:⁶

I have only had one experience, when I assigned to serve at Hollat. One of the elders of the church invited me to go and watch a woman dancing naked, her movements signified worship with the movement of her head and eyes staring towards the full moon. She was dancing freely on the sandy beach (24.00 onwards). But because it looked normal, not as a threat, I regarded it as nothing special. At that time and later because there were no deaths or illness I concluded that she only wanted to release her suppressed longings, or that the powers couldn't be used because anymore because the world is becoming more advanced... *Suanggi* at that time were described as people who danced naked at night in open spaces. It was concluded provisionally that this dancing was a dance of worship to the moon and earth. However whether that was true or not, I don't know. Then I talked with the traditional elders and the older elders of the church to confirm this meaning. Then it all pointed to certain people and certain family surnames and they were expelled from the social environment (community and congregation).

Another opinion concerning the relationship between *suanggi* and suicide were conveyed by Rev. ON as follows:⁷

Many times, parents miss this matter when in-

⁶ Interview with GL, 16 April 2020 via *WhatsApp*.

⁷ ON's point of view in a comment in one posting on FB about the relationship of suicide and *suanggi*.

formation and knowledge is passed on to their children, so the deepest layer of the child's soul is vulnerable or perhaps doesn't even exist. In this situation, all people are easily controlled by the power of black magic. Based on ministry, I have to deal with the young people and parents who fall into a trance for example. It cannot be regarded that dark powers do not exist. It has to be stated that these powers exist, therefore we should always be on guard and we should not lose. The handling of the case should not directly deal with the power concerned, but the burden that is the main reason needs to be found, when all is dealt within a balanced way recovery usually takes place.

The opinions show the characteristic view about *suanggi* in the thought of Moluccan people, that is, as a representation of demons and at the same time limited by the concept of the power of God as believed according to the Christian faith. This shows that the dialectic integration of the two entities (powers of good and evil) is part of religiosity and the way of expressing all phenomena that is regarded as outside of rationality.

Besides being regarded as “existing”, the power of evil forces is believed to be able to influence humans only when there is a void in a person's mind or soul that it is easy for these demons to take hold. The condition of a “void” in the mind and soul, as attributed to young people, occurs because they do not receive the attention they should from their parents and religion (church) even though the children are in the period of seeking their own identities and transitioning from the childhood phase to the adult phase.

Strengthening the Social Role of the Christian Religion to Prevent Suicidal Behavior

Some other informants hold the view that in order to understand the phenomena of suicide amongst Ambonese Christian youngsters, research must be carried regarding the life history of the family of those who committed suicide. The informants who regarded social analysis as being important were divided into two

groups: (1) those who do not deny the existence of supernatural powers such as *suanggi* or demons; (2) those who did not believe there was any connection between *suanggi* and suicide. For these two groups, tracing the life history and background of these families must be carried out as a method of comprehending what was the root of the phenomena of suicide and prepare steps to prevent suicide attempts.

They placed this phenomenon of suicide amongst teenagers in the context of urban society in Ambon that in the last two decades had experienced revolutionary social change, especially since the conflict of 1999-2005. The increasingly difficult demands of the families' economy and the narrower the opportunity becomes for building a life that produces inner and external, along with pressures for self actualization that drive various forms of unhealthy competition that is money oriented, has formed a social character of society that is belligerent and suspicious of whoever or whatever is thought to harm their economic opportunities. Families who are located in urban and semi-urban areas living on top of each other and competing against each other for economic opportunities, while the work sector that is available is minimal. Locally generated income in Ambon only lies in the service, tourism and fishery sectors. There is no middle or large scale industries that are able to absorb the layers of manpower that are stacked up, whether for those meet the educational standard (first degree) or those whose education does not reach the standard (non-degree).

A narrow urban land area that is "hemmed in" by the hills and the sea (Ambon Bay) are the geographical conditions that become an obstacle in the expansion of urban areas. While on the other hand, it is directly proportional to the rapid population growth. The provincial and city governments often face situations of overlapping authority in dealing with social-economic and political problems in the city. The large-scale procurement of public open spaces cannot be carried out as a media to channel the energy of urban society, especially for young people. The

slogan "city of music", for example, has only been partially implemented and even that has been sporadic that has only been felt with the mushrooming of local group bands or individuals who have performed live in cafes that have sprung up in various areas of the city. Lack of provision of buildings for the arts that comply with the standards needed for performing arts (orchestra concerts, dance and so on), except the auditorium in the Cultural Centre (*Taman Budaya*) of Maluku Province in Karang Panjang.⁸ Thus, concerts on a national scale rarely take place and are not handled seriously and professionally as an event to look out for the musical potential of young people in Ambon so that it could be professional choice for the future of young Ambonese musicians.

It is not surprising, that youngsters channel their energy in going round in groups and forming motorbike gangs that almost every night took part in illegal racing on the main roads. These groups have the potential for being involved in criminal acts, like guzzling alcohol, consuming and distributing drugs, steal motorbikes, and so on, that the police categorize as actions that disturb the peace or even teenage crime.⁹

The phenomena of suicide have multiple causes. As has been explained in the tracing of the theories on suicide, there are three clusters of theories: (1) biological theory; (2) psychological theory and (3) sociological theory. This research does not take a separate position but uses these three theoretical perspectives as an integral part of the religious studies lens that is used here. The lens is used to understand the relational dynamics between individuals and a structure of society – agency and structure – in Ambon, that

⁸ The auditorium was damaged as a result of 6,5 SR earthquake and aftershocks from 26th September 2019 onwards in Ambon and the surrounding islands.

⁹ An official of AM-GPM told of how he had accompanied 3 teenagers (AM-GPM members) of one congregation of the North Ambon Island Presbytery who were caught by the police because of robberies that took place on the Merah Putih Bridge. The reason they stole from people was that they snatched other people's belongings is that they wanted to buy a new mobile phone or the newest gadget so that they appeared to be trendy like many of the other teenagers in Ambon.

possesses different characteristics from Western society that are explained in these theories. Religious habitus can never be separated from social structures and various cultural hierarchies that become the context of the Ambonese society (Deal and Beal 2004: 51).

In this context, religion is understood as an entity that is constructive and deconstructive. It constructs a consciousness of the existence of supernatural entities that are categorized as good and evil. This is type of construction of consciousness of religion grows and endures the length of the history of civilization and culture of mankind. The construction of consciousness offers a opposition-binary way of thinking that sees the total reality of life as a cosmic between good and evil powers. Mankind is in the middle of a battle that swings between the two cosmic powers. This cosmic battle cannot be avoided. Mankind can only “choose” which side to be on. From there mankind discovers the potential self-existence for free will.

But religion can also play a deconstructive function towards the reality of universal life. In facing various multi-dimensional phenomena that are faced and carried out by mankind, religion becomes the entry-point for mankind to form their own rationality, with which mankind feels certain s/he has found the answer to the mystery that s/he is facing. Dealing with various contradictive socio-cultural realities with orthodox principles, religion is able to demonstrate theological flexibility to embrace these tensions so that they can be explained as a form of negotiation that can reconcile the elements of reality and its opposing mystery. In this context, mystic reality concerning *suanggi* is not negated, but it is negotiated by having it included in the category of “evil power” or “demon” that is correlated in opposition to the “good power” or “God”. These two do not destroy each other. Thus the “good power” (God) and the “evil power” (devil) co-exist.

Institutionalized Christianity, as the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM), has its own historical process of modernization that is

different from Christianity in the Western world. Modernization in Maluku went hand in hand with Christianization in the past by Western economic powers (Portuguese and Dutch). This process of integrating religion and culture took place as a dichotomy between “modern” (become Christian) and “traditional” (local religion or *nunusaku*) (Ellen 2015: 266-269; Bartels 2017: 377-386). These two belief systems are accepted as two layers that complete each other as well as being contradictive. The discourse of religion and culture becomes a classical discourse continued in the general theological understanding of GPM. Religion fills a public space and conversely culture colors the expression of the religiosity of Christians (Gaspersz 2016: 129-133). The position and role of *tete-nene moyang* (ancestors), for example, are still accepted with a vague use of language between “respect” and “worship” with the connotation that the meanings are regarded as different. “Respect” is weighed with an anthropological meaning, while “worship” has a theological meaning. In that way, the position of God is not believed to be the only One and separate, but relational with other supernatural entities surrounding the life of mankind such as *nitu* (evil spirit), *nita* (good spirit), *suanggi*, and *setan* (demon).

This classic discourse on the dichotomy of religion and culture is really what gives life to Christianity in Maluku, compared to its source in the West that is increasingly experiencing a significant setback in spirituality, hit by waves of capitalistic economic modernization. At the same time, the unique historical process of Christianity in Maluku has encouraged a dynamic process of ideological consolidation and theological construction. In its journey since it became an independent church in 1935, GPM has been increasingly strong in confirming its identity as a solid religious organization, that is of course sustained by strong theological pillars but flexible in absorbing dimensions of change in each era that it passes through until the present time (Gaspersz 2009: 136-148). In the context of organizing congregations that are spread

over various islands stretched over vast areas of ocean sociologically has made GPM strengthen its capacity for institutional integration through the strengthening of organization regulations and work mechanism that are rigidly structured.

During the last 85 years (1935-2020) GPM has become a strong religious organization (Gaspersz et al. 2015). However, all developments have their consequences. The greatest consequence is the ordering of religious life by the church continues mechanically so that adaptation to social changes, especially post conflict, are difficult because of the rigidity of the bureaucratic mechanism as an organization. Even though, as a religious organization with the largest number of members in Maluku, congregation members of GPM are an integral part of Moluccan society that is continually experiencing the dynamics of social, political, economic and cultural change, along with the societal development today.

In the context of a solid institution with excessive levels of social integration like that, then, the phenomena of suicide amongst Christian youngsters – who are also members of GPM – is a manifestation of fatalistic suicide (Emile Durkheim) as a strong influence by the church's panopticon (Michel Foucault) in the daily lives of its members. There is a programmed intervention in almost every aspect of the lives of the congregation by the church institution so that it is almost difficult to imagine the personal and social development of the individual without the control of the church.

This situation, on one hand, has caused a high level of dependency of the congregation towards the church institution. But on the other hand, it has increasingly strengthened the power of the clergy that is supported by the hierarchical institutional mechanism of the church. The phenomenon of suicide then is seen more as only individual psychological pathology which is only viewed partially and only linked to the reality of supernatural "evil power" that needs the intervention of the "good power" of the church with its line of clergy to face it.

Douglas' interpretative lens helps to study the phenomena of suicide as more of a social act that is meant to communicate a message about the life values of the one who commits suicide, which here is focused on Christian young people. If Christianity that has become the foundation of life that forms values and the way of looking at human reality in the context of Ambonese society, there is a need to probe deeper into the social meaning of the string of suicide cases that occurred amongst Ambonese Christian young people.

What signals have been understood by the members of the congregation, clergy and the church as a religious institution, in an attempt to understand the incidents of suicide committed by these Christian youngsters? By using Douglas' theory, the primary and secondary signals must be found in order to determine whether the action of the Christian youngsters was that they "physically committed their own suicide" or "society or the social system/structure that is actually killing their souls and thoughts" through various exaggerated moral controls so that they do not give space for their social-existence to build their own healthy and independent rationality. This moral control is especially evident in the packed worship activities and the theological messages delivered all the time through sermons in the series of services that place all week long. In almost all of the sermon content the clergy blame lifestyle, mischief and trends of young people, through the stigmatism of "juvenile delinquency", "youth crime", "drugs", "alcohol", "promiscuity", "pregnancy outside of marriage", or "being a drop out".

On one hand, the dominant approach to mentoring that is carried out towards young people is very ritualistic and formal. Although it has to be acknowledged that there have been a number of breakthrough programmes and significant activities carried out by AM-GPM in every level of its organization from smaller branches up till the executive board level. Meanwhile, on the other hand, these Christian teenagers are wrestling to discover the meaning of their social role and

identity within the complex social-economic situation of the urban society of Ambon. They have not discovered the channelling of creative freedom in thinking, opinions and work that is appreciated as an expression of religiosity of their youth, to possess a potential that places themselves in the process of the formation of competitive characters who are brave enough to take risks in life (not death).

Sociologically, the *suanggi* rumor is a form of personification of a society that “haunts”, “threatens” and “kills” the consciousness and souls of the Christian teenagers. The church that should play the role of becoming the channels of spirituality that strengthens identity and confirms their confidence often seems failed. Rather they are often placed under the shadows of moral values that have been formed and determined subjectively by the clergy.

Based on the elaboration above, this article comes to the end of its main objective, that is, unfolding the vital role of religion not only as a symbolic reflection of faith in God but to strengthening religious community itself as well as the society in general to commit social cohesion within the changing socio-cultural context of the modern society today.

CONCLUSION

This small piece of research has tried to trace various sociological and religious data (Christian) and organize this data into a series of descriptions in order to understand this “trend” of committing suicide. It has to be acknowledged that the phenomena of suicide contains multi-dimensional factors of the cause, support and trigger of the continuity so that it has become a social issue that is very complex and has multiple interpretations.

As a preliminary research, what has been discovered in the process of this research brings us to three theses:

Thesis one. The social change of the urban society of Ambon has implications on the shift of the order of traditional life values both gradually

and revolutionary (especially post social conflict in Maluku 1999-2005). At the same time, clashes have taken place between the traditional culture (village) and morality (church). These two social institutions possess a strong influence in determining communal and moral principles in the city of Ambon. In the middle of such social changes, the younger generation are the group that is the most susceptible psychologically and sociologically because they are at the fork of the transitional tension of identity. The demands of social recognition, in a society that is communal, often experiences clashes of self identity and the pressing social norms and morality that have been formed by society and parents.

Thesis two. In a modern and urban society like the city of Ambon, religion becomes an entity that accommodates the communal spirit and protects common morality through its teachings and practice of rituals. In this function and role then teaching the practice of religious rituals (Christian) often are in the position of being face-to-face with shifting moral and traditional values because the continuous pounding of social, economic, political and cultural changes in line with the development of digital technology of information-communications that increasingly open wide the flow of information from various parties and the waves of social transformation and life style that goes with it.

Thesis three. The phenomena of suicide amongst teenagers in Ambon, that was accompanied by the circulation of information about the influence of the *suanggi* (demon; shaman; sorcerer) and the reactive response of the Christian community (GPM congregations) by increasing the frequency of ritual, like prayer and special services in the churches or the places that are thought as sacred or spooky actually reflects the clashes between pressing social changes urban society, especially those experienced by amongst Ambonese Christian teenagers, and the efforts of the rationalization and construction of principles of a new morality. Rationalization by the religion is needed to explain the dynamics of comprehension of what are regarded as good and

not good (evil) values. Especially if the scientific explanation ignores them because they are regarded as superstition and do not make sense.

These three theses clearly demonstrate that the role, function and strength of rationalization of religion is one determinant factor that explores the probable causes of the suicide trend amongst the Ambonese young people, not only to emphasize the conclusion of the analysis in the direction of external factors (sociological, political, economic, and cultural), but also to point towards internal factors (institutional, theological, dogmatic, ecclesiological) that is the dynamic base of religious communities and religious institutions.

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