

# Socio-historical Reflections on the Existence of the Protestant Church of Maluku

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**Abstract**— The tragedy of social conflict 1999-2005 in Maluku archipelago has driven the Protestant Church of Maluku (GPM) to realize that such conflict doesn't help to bring benefit for every ones in any way. Along with the Muslim brothers/sisters in Maluku, the GPM totally realized that "we were all useless victims". Since then, based on such horrible experience, GPM develops so-called "pro-life theology" as a way to provide new theological perspective and practical ecclesiastic acts for sustainable peace-building. With this clear vision, GPM desires to strengthen its call to develop a better system of life together. This paper is a literature review to identify the people's traditions that can be used for triggering of conflict and even closely related to the increasingly widespread radicalism.

The article tends to answer some research questions: What is the crucial viewpoint for GPM on its 80 years existence as a church in Maluku? Is it only an organization? What is the meaning of GPM as church for her congregations in Maluku archipelago? The prime loyalty is not on the organization enterprise but merely to God in Jesus Christ. Speaking theologically, church is the body of Christ. The institution is only a tool, not the power of the church. The power of the church is the power of Holy Spirit.

**Keywords**— *multicultural, tradition, ecclesiology, Maluku Island*

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE CHURCH AS A CLOVE TREE

In 1926, Hendrik Kraemer, a Dutch missionary, came to Ambon for a month to observe the church's growth in the Dutch Indies. Apart from his finding concerning the economic condition in Ambon, he also cynically observed the Ambonese were generally lazy and poor people. Regarding such issue, an Ambonese Christian scholar, Arnold N. Radjawane once stated that "in Ambon, religion is a native product, just like cloves."

This metaphor and historical setting are important to be reflected. Firstly, what kind of development and transformation have taken place in the life of the Maluku church? Is the mentality of poverty and laziness observed by Kraemer still the same issues until today? Secondly, if Ambonese Christianity is analogous with cloves, we might ask whether or not these cloves are still growing and fragrant or are they dry and losing their leaves? There are obviously some other questions that need to be discussed concerning "Eight decades of planting, watering, and growing." [1]

I would not discuss here the whole history of GPM, rather I would like to reflect little bit on the theology of GPM as it has

served the people of Maluku since around the 1935. The founders of GPM opted 1 Corinthians 3:6 as the GPM's motto, which reminds us that God is the Giver of fruits despite our weariness as we plant and water. It is important to realize that we really are God's clove plantation.

Moluccans know that clove trees must be cared for and nurtured so that they can grow and bear fruits. Long before modern farming technology, the ancestors planted cloves in fertile soil. At a certain age, clove trees stop producing fruits. The tree may be very big and healthy but it won't yield as much fruit as it used to. And if there is fruit, it's very difficult to pick it up. Trees must be nurtured so that they continue to bear fruit or re-generation. One of the big challenges of the church is the continuously regeneration. The potential of GPM pastors and church members must be developed. Programs and allocation of funds to encourage the development of GPM's human resources are primary needs. The old saying is true: "if you want to harvest every month, plant corn. If you want to harvest every year, plant trees. If you want to harvest every hundred years, plant people."

## II. METHODOLOGY

This research is using a literature review. Selected scientific papers and books reviewed are used as primary resources to build up critical perspective on the research issue. The main resources are around cultural studies, sociological and anthropological theories and theological studies.

Data presented here were drawn from a research project that explored on the ways in the boundaries of value and wisdom in a complex culture, spatial, structural, social, economic, psychological and patriarchal found on literature. Data are collected from primer resources that are journals and seconder resources that are books about Maluku societies.

The steps of research as follows: a) collecting literature according to the scope of research. b) gathering data from literature as research aim and scope. c) making data systematization; d) classifying data needed for research. e) evaluating and eliminating data according to data classified. f) analyzing data using hermeneutical constituents.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Like clove trees which are not immune to pests, the church experiences many challenges and threats. Since the church lives

in the world, the issues it faces are not only spiritual matters but also social, economic, cultural and political in nature. GPM and other Indonesian churches are facing increasingly complex problems in terms of ecology, technology, communication, drugs, terrorism, and inter-ethnic tensions [2].

In the 1960s GPM almost collapsed, and was forced to ask both members and ministers to return to the Word of God. The repentance of 1960 was a critical correction moment for GPM as church. Reverend Wim David, a lecturer at the faculty of theology UKIM, once stated, "On the May 4, 1960, a difficult situation led the church to draft the repentance statement of the synod board at that time. This statement reflected the moment of rehabilitation when the church did not just realize that they were weak and failed, but also demonstrated their needs to be renewed by the Holy Spirit." It is, then, well-known as "Pesan Tobat 1960" (Repentance Appeal 1960) [3].

#### *A. After 80 years, what have accomplished as a church?*

If the church is sustaining to grow and bear fruit, as a sign of church, we have to appreciate the potential of the church members whose variety of gifts that must be managed well. The church must also has good relationship with the government as its partner in doing God's mission (*missio Dei*). As such, church plays very important role to send constructive criticism for the government. It means that the church walk along with the government and realize itself as imperfect instrument in God's hands, so that willing to open herself to realizes that God works through other institutions as well.

GPM has been walking through very dynamic of its history in Maluku as well as Indonesia. During the *Orde Lama* era (Old Order) of Indonesia, churches, including GPM, supported and gave substantial contribution for the nation-building processes. When Sukarno, the first president of Indonesia, came to Ambon to visit the church, it showed that the government really cares about the church. Moreover, GPM was tested in the revolt occasion on 1950 by the RMS (Republic of South Maluku) exponents to appeal Maluku as the independent state. In this case, GPM's commitment to joint with Republic of Indonesia was challenged. Reverend Thom Pattiasina, the chairperson of GPM Synod Board and the critical supporter of the Indonesian Independence movement, clearly articulated vision and principle of GPM's nationalism. He committed the GPM for supporting the subsequent development of this new-born nation-state of Indonesia.

In the *Orde Baru* era (New Order) of Indonesia under General Suharto's presidency, Indonesian churches, including GPM, were facing a new political context with many challenges, especially around state and religion relationships. At first, Christians were given political spaces by the New Order regime since the ruling government restricted any political religious movements, especially Islam. The government obviously enforced so-called developmentalism and nationalism [4].

However, when Suharto felt that his power was gradually reduced by his opponents and even by his supporters, he swung into the Islamic groups and systematically marginalized other religious groups, including Christianity or churches. It causes systematic negative impacts on relations of church and government. In 1961, Frank Cooley, an American missionary-

anthropologist, surveyed the attitudes of few congregations in Maluku in terms of relations of church and government in Central Maluku. Based on his anthropological research he discovered some tensions on church-state relationship in Maluku at that time. He argued that it will become undercover problems that color church-state relationship in the future of Maluku. In 2011, GPM responded to this problem with a new church's regulation namely "The guidance for church councils to work together with the village governments" in order to synergize the strengths of these two institutions.

#### *B. Becoming a multicultural and pro-life church*

The tragedy of social conflict 1999-2005 in Maluku has driven the GPM to realize, along with other social elements and religions in Maluku, that the conflict was totally useless. Along with the Muslim brothers-sisters in Maluku, GPM stated that both Muslims and Christians were victims of ridiculous religious misunderstanding. Based on the tragedy, Rev. Dr. I. W. J. Hendriks, a former chairperson of GPM Synod Board, once promoted a "pro-life theology" as a reflection for peace and reconciliation. Through this clear vision of living together as human being, GPM desires to strengthen her calling to develop a constructive system of life together. One Muslim scholar observed about the Maluku conflict as follows:

First, the all Moluccans population, in general, realize that they are all victims of the conflict. They experienced massive physical and emotional destruction, even live in many segregated neighborhoods as their religious affiliations. However, though live in such conditions, the multicultural Ambonese communities must develop tolerance in order to avoid offense against "our relatives on the other side." All parties must keep the spirit of brother/sisterhood against provocation and potential conflict in the future.

Second, the conflict shocked us to realize that our religious institutions should be renewed whether on their theologies or institutional policies about other religions. A systematic renewal can be seen first in the GPM. Based on the GPM decisions and program reports during last ten years, we can see GPM's strong desire to be a "Church of Moluccan". For instance, the pro-life theology has helped the church to discuss many concrete programs for promoting peace and reconciliation.

Although the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (the Association of Indonesian Islamic Scholars – MUI) is being engulfed by fundamentalist parties, it continues to campaign the importance of pluralism understanding in Moluccan communities. After the conflict, the MUI branch Maluku, GPM and the Catholic Church Diocese of Amboina altogether established the Maluku Inter-Religious Institution (*Lembaga Antar-Iman Maluku*). On the other hand, Muslims brothers and sisters struggled to promote so-called "Cultural Islam" that actually merging the local cultural values with universal Islamic tenets as a way to contextualize Islam for the Moluccans.

#### *C. The creation of independent theology of people*

The church administration of district and synod boards are not only to be seen as merely responsible for the administration

enterprise but a process of empowering the independent congregational theology. When every church member positions themselves as the subject of theology, everything done to build church must be seen as theological endeavor.

We endeavor that theology must be alive within the congregations' life, bridging structural gaps between church leaders and members. Theology actually is existential reflection by the people who live their life in every concrete situation or context. It is not such an elites' theological business by theological schools. The congregations and theological schools must work together to create the living contextual theology. After eighty years of service as the church in Maluku, we should ask reflective question: Have our congregations experienced theological independence? Have the congregations still rely on their pastors for doing everything, and the pastors themselves enjoy the central position they hold?

#### *D. Waves call waves: the problem of GPM*

Our problem is not when the waves will stop but how we face the coming waves [5]. I will now outline twelve problems that is faced by the GPM:

1. The environmental degradation and natural disasters
2. Poverty and economic struggle of church members
3. The epidemic of HIV/AIDS
4. The development of formal church education and theological education for church members
5. Strengthening spiritual survival of families
6. Increasing the capacity of ministers
7. Strengthening ecumenical networks
8. Dialogue, working together with other religions
9. Strengthening elementary education and teaching
10. The political role of GPM
11. The financial resources of the church
12. The development of information and documentation.

Regarding these 12 issues and several other issues that will always become problems for GPM, following issues must be explained further:

1. Increasing the spirituality of ministers and church members.  
GPM needs to develop a spirituality that increases the ability of the members to response variety of social problems faced by the Moluccan communities at large. The Pentecost emphasizes an absolute role of the Holy Spirit for growing and developing the church. The church is not built by the human power but always open to the role of Holy Spirit.
2. Optimizing the role of church education.  
Education is one of the primary functions of the church. The church must train member to live with integrity in an increasingly secular and hedonistic world. GPM's seminary in Ambon is one of the best educational institutions in Maluku, but we hope to increase the level of research so that we can better understand how to transform our communities. GPM also desires to increase the quality of Sunday school and catechism.
3. Poverty, violence, and injustice.

Poverty is not only caused by culture of entitlement and laziness but also by unjust structures that oppress the poor. Indonesian government has often focused development programs on certain areas while ignoring other dimension of the development. Poverty and injustice impact to the emergence of domestic violence or even civil wars. The church is called to overcome poverty and cry for justice, coping with the roots of poverty and violence. This is keeping with GPM's vision and mission for bringing the signs of the God's Reign to the earth: love, justice, peace, and the wholeness of creation.

4. Church and government relations.  
The discourse of church and government relations actually is an eternal issue throughout the history of Christianity all over the world. Global Christians should consider this issue seriously to avoid the practical interference of church into politics and vice versa. These two entities will always interact one to another. From our history, we learn that it requires a constructive approach to determine theologically church and government relations.
5. Strengthening local traditions through contextual theology.  
The existence of traditional religion and local culture are very influential in Ambon [6]. The conflation of Ambonese traditions and the Gospel are known as "Religion of Ambon" (Frank Cooley). Since this kind of syncretism is very influential, GPM faced tensions between 'modernist' party (willing to eliminate local culture or *adat*) and 'traditional' party (willing to maintaining *adat*), which was demonstrated by the Repentance Message (*Pesan Tobat*) in 1960. The goal of the *Pesan Tobat* was to purify the Gospel from traditional religious elements practiced by the Moluccan Christian communities. The GPM synod board at the time was attempting to help Moluccan Christians grow in their faith but, on the other hand, it brought destructive impacts for understanding cultural identity of Christian Moluccans. Therefore, the church's viewpoint and attitude towards local culture should be re-evaluated by promoting a contextual theology as pure reflection of the church members about their life, relation to God and world where they live in [7]. So, their faith grows contextually as Moluccan communities rather than merely identifying with Jewish culture.
6. Maritime civilization and a theology of the sea  
GPM is the archipelago church. Its congregations live in many islands. Therefore, this church must think about a theology of sea that fit to the development paradigm of the Indonesian government. A theology that always connect to everyday life of its congregations. It means that the congregations that mostly live in coastal areas may use creatively metaphors, symbols, and idioms of sea to create meaningful living Christian spirituality. A theology that should come from two directions: top and bottom. The goal is giving meaning that sea/ocean can bring prosperity for Moluccan communities and discovering God's will in their living contexts as islanders.
7. Radicalism and religion-faith relation

Some important questions should be asked: How does the church work with other religions to live harmoniously in the midst of intolerance and the politicization of religion? How does the church witness and applying its mission in the context of multiple religions?

8. The economic autonomy of the church.

One crucial problem of GPM in her 80 anniversary is economic autonomy. By this, I mean both the condition of church finance and the development of economic autonomy for the church members. The congregation is encouraged to develop their potential resources through inter-congregation partnership programs. The planning of economic development of the church must be increased and become main objectives. Including in this issue is the church must open her networks to work together with the government or other religious organizations for the economic prosperity of the congregations.

9. Food independence.

Global farming has taken small communities' hostage as farmers who previously used seeds and ate food that locally available becoming dependent on the outside materials: imported seeds and foods. For example, congregations and communities in the Babar islands who usually eat corn are changing to eat rice. This is ironic in a time when we worry about the "plastic rice" phenomenon. Food diversification must be implemented by congregations through creative programs. For instance, the movement of one day without rice.

10. Environmental issues and the role of church advocacy.

A variety of natural disasters, ecological concerns that threaten our future, extreme weather, and trash in the ocean are challenges that need to be respond seriously. The church must advocate for the environment balance and conservation as it develops and implements a ecological theology.

11. Dynamic ecumenical relations.

Since its establishment in 1935 until nowadays, GPM has been playing central roles in local, national, and international ecumenical movements. Her involvement in the ecumenical world shows that GPM opens herself for working together with other Christian denominations. This movements is not only a reality at the top level but manifested in various ecumenical programs at the congregational level. Yet we acknowledge that there are still many difficult issues to overcome in the struggle for mutual ecumenical understanding. Dispute of inter-denominations understanding requires an wisdom-based attitude.

12. The importance of planning church ministry for sustainability.

As church's ten-year planning, we must pay attention to our history as well as the needs and realities of our communities. Obviously, we cannot predict the future but that does not mean we lose our focus. These plans depend on our ability to analyze both local and global issues.

The problems above cannot be resolved immediately. We need new wise strategies and solidarity between congregations, districts, ministers, and church members. We must also work together with the government and other organizations. If we return to our cultural roots we must work by "*masohi*" (working together or cooperation) to build a brighter future together as human communities.

*E. Hope for GPM*

The "cloves" that were planted 80 years ago may be dry and perhaps the leaves are falling off the trees. Probably the cloves are not the most important export of our country anymore. There are many other plants that have taken prominence. The focus of development has now moved to the sea, leading us to reconsider our theological orientation. As Jesus said to his disciples on the shores of Galilee: "Now go out where it is deeper and let down your nets to catch some fish" (Luke 5:4). We must go out to the deeper side of our sea life. We must respond to the challenges and opportunities of current reality with faith in the God who commands us to go to deeper side for catching fishes. The harvest of fish will be great as we keep moving out. Cloves fruit and spice our lives with their fragrant scent because we faithfully plant and water. In the same way, we expect our nets to be full of fish as we obey Jesus' calling.

*F. A new pattern of church theology: imperative for GPM*

What is interesting about GPM's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a church in Maluku? Is GPM merely an organization? What does GPM mean to her congregations? In GPM, people are not loyal to the organization but only to God. They understand that the church is the body of Christ. The organization is only a tool, not the center of church. The center of church is the power of Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, GPM was a part of the colonial church under the Dutch Reformed Church. The colonial church supported all of GPM ministries. After the end of colonial era, GPM had to manage herself autonomously. Many people thought that this would be the end of GPM because the colonial church no longer financially supported teachers and evangelists in GPM [8]. However, obviously it was not the end-life of GPM. By the 1950s, people began to realize that an "Invisible Hands" was guiding the church. The church members, teachers, and evangelists who worked during that time understood that God never let the church alone even when the world abandoned it. In eight decades, GPM should realize that she can trust the power of Holy Spirit that supporting and teaching her in accordance to God's Word.

Theology must be historical because the basis for theology is the people's faith; faith as response to God in historical context of human being. The church acknowledges that faith without works is dead. What does that mean? It means that faith has historical dimension. Faith grows and it is rooted in history. This is the same question with asking why God has to become a human. Because only in becoming a human, God become concrete existence and God's Word may be witnessed.

This is how we understand to become a church in the world. As a church we are the object and Christ alone is the subject who works as a Spirit within the church.

Theology is the heart of the church and decides our future. Theology is the root of congregation. Evangelist, teachers, and pastors do not only speak to the congregation about God and faith but they experience God along with the congregations they serve. This is why, since experienced difficult situation after her independent, the Holy Spirit continue to be with the church. GPM is not only an organization or church that is understood through scholarship and high theology. Our congregations reflect their faith as their own theology. This is why we now need to figure out how to articulate their faith and theology so that it becomes the theology of wider church in this context. The Holy Spirit works and speaks not only in Hebrew and Greek languages but also in many local languages of human being, including Moluccan communities: Yamdena, Fordata, Ambon-Malay, Alune, Wemale, Buru and many others [9].

The Bible tells us that God calls to leave everything we possessed and going to a place that we do not know. Abraham taught his children to believe in God's promises. Our congregations read and believe this, and do that believe within their everyday life in their villages and families. The family is the basis of our church. Besides Sunday service, GPM has several services for families and congregations where each parent have time to teach Christian's faith to their family members.

It is important here to discuss the term common sense. Clifford Geertz says that Islam and Christianity were not able to destroy the common sense of communities of well-known now as Indonesia. We are not saying that Christianity in Maluku is like a layer cake. Geertz says that people can live without religion or science but they cannot live without common sense. Our congregations absorb the ideas in the Bible through their common sense. This is the reason most of church members keep the Gospel in their life even though they have no high-educated background. Common sense was born along with a human and is always with a human. Theologically, common sense is a sign from the Holy Spirit to help human discover their own identity and culture [10]. Nikolas Radjawane, a Moluccan theologian, said that since 1970s GPM's experience of serving and renewing the church became a reference for churches in Holland for helping them to solve church problems they were facing.

As Israel experienced the mercy of God in various life situations, our congregations experience the same mercy when God provides *laor* (sea-worm that can be consumed by human) that come out during the east season when it is hard for the people to find fish. They don't not only read about Stephen died for his faith but congregations in Maluku experienced an extreme oppression during the Japanese occupation. Many pastors and their families and church members died for their faith. Their death is the death of Christ, the death of Stephen, who died to plant a new seed. GPM also experienced the impact of conflict and riots of 1999. Many

congregations and districts were affected by the conflict. They fled but were not extinguished. Congregations care of God, the head of the church. In that way, GPM continues to grow and fruit.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The tragedy of social conflict 1999-2005 in Maluku has driven the GPM to realize, along with other social elements and religions in Maluku, that the conflict was totally useless. Along with the Muslim brothers-sisters in Maluku, GPM stated that both Muslims and Christians were victims of ridiculous religious misunderstanding.

GPM has been a part of the Christian history in Maluku. The future of GPM would not be decided by any human. We are going to continue to plant, watering, praying, and hoping, but it is God who will decide the future of the church.

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