

The Negotiation of Religious Identity through Reincarnation and Ritual Healing: A Study of the Dayak Tunjung Christian Community, Indonesia

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Received: 2022-12-21; Accepted: 2024-08-24; Published: 2024-12-25

Abstract: This study explores how members of the Dayak Tunjung Christian community in Lamin Telihan, East Kalimantan, continue to practise and affirm traditional beliefs in reincarnation (*Suli*) and ritual healing (*Belian*) despite their formal affiliation with the Evangelical Christian Church (GKII). The research aims to understand the dynamics of religious identity negotiation between institutional Christianity and local cosmological frameworks that have long shaped the community's worldview. Using a qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and field notes involving traditional leaders, church members, and community elders. The findings reveal that *Suli* and *Belian* persist not merely as residual pre-Christian practices but as active, meaningful expressions of lived religion that contribute to spiritual resilience and cultural continuity. These practices function as alternative frameworks for interpreting life, death, and healing—often offering more inclusive and contextually relevant narratives than doctrinal Christian eschatology. The study shows that religious conversion among the Dayak Tunjung is not a linear or total rupture from the past but a layered process of hybridisation and negotiation. The research contributes to scholarship on syncretism, vernacular religion, and ethical pluralism by presenting a unique Indonesian case where indigenous cosmologies coexist with global religious structures. This originality lies in its focus on reincarnation within a Christian setting—a subject rarely explored in Southeast Asian contexts—highlighting the adaptive and dialogical nature of religiosity in multicultural societies.

Keywords: Dayak Tunjung; reincarnation; ritual healing; syncretism; vernacular religion.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana komunitas Kristen Dayak Tunjung di Lamin Telihan, Kalimantan Timur, tetap mempertahankan dan menjalankan kepercayaan tradisional terhadap reinkarnasi (*Suli*) dan ritual penyembuhan (*Belian*) meskipun secara institusional telah menjadi bagian dari Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia (GKII). Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah memahami dinamika negosiasi identitas keagamaan antara ajaran Kristen dan kerangka kosmologis lokal yang telah lama membentuk pandangan hidup masyarakat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode Grounded Theory. Teknik pengumpulan data mencakup wawancara semi-terstruktur, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi lapangan yang melibatkan tokoh adat, warga jemaat, dan pemuka komunitas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa praktik *Suli* dan *Belian* tidak hanya bertahan sebagai peninggalan masa lalu, tetapi menjadi ekspresi aktif dari agama yang dijalani (*lived religion*), berfungsi sebagai kerangka alternatif dalam memahami kematian, penyembuhan, dan relasi spiritual dengan leluhur. Proses konversi agama di komunitas ini bukanlah keputusan total terhadap kepercayaan lama, melainkan proses berlapis yang menghasilkan konfigurasi religius yang sinkretik dan kontekstual. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian sinkretisme, agama vernakular, dan pluralisme etik, dengan menghadirkan kasus unik di Indonesia mengenai keberlangsungan kepercayaan reinkarnasi dalam komunitas Kristen. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada fokusnya terhadap interaksi antara doktrin Kristen dan kosmologi lokal dalam konteks Asia Tenggara, yang masih jarang dikaji secara mendalam.

Kata Kunci: Dayak Tunjung; reinkarnasi; penyembuhan ritual; sinkretisme; agama vernakular.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the dynamics between formal religion and local traditions have emerged as a critical issue in the study of religion and culture, particularly in the context of indigenous communities in Indonesia. While many of these communities have formally converted to major world religions such as Islam, Christianity, or Catholicism, they continue to preserve ancestral spiritual practices inherited through generations. This phenomenon reflects an ongoing process of negotiation, integration, and, in some cases, syncretism between formal religious doctrines and local belief systems, which are not necessarily abandoned following conversion. For instance, the Jalawastu community—administratively located in Central Java but culturally embedded in Sundanese traditions that dominate neighbouring West Java—practices a harmonious coexistence between Islamic teachings and ancestral customs, reinforcing local wisdom and social cohesion (Asrawijaya, 2022). Similarly, the Dayak Pesaguan community in Kalimantan blends Catholicism with Kanjan Serayong cultural rituals, especially in funerary ceremonies, fostering communal solidarity and cultural resilience (Endi, Ranubaya, & Watu, 2024). In the realm of architecture, the Wapauwe Mosque in Maluku integrates Islamic religious values with local cultural aesthetics, exemplifying the localisation of religious expression (Handoko et al., 2024). Likewise, in Madura, traditional *dhâmmong* rituals have been embedded with Islamic educational values, illustrating the flexible integration of religious and cultural forms (Hasan, 2020). These cases reveal that religious identity in such communities is not static but shaped by continuous dialogue between universal doctrines and lived local experiences. Accordingly, examining how indigenous communities retain and reinterpret their ancestral beliefs within formal religious frameworks is crucial to understanding the plural and dynamic nature of religiosity in contemporary Indonesian society.

One prominent example of this dynamic is the persistence of reincarnation beliefs among the Christian Dayak Tunjung community in Lamin Teliha, East Kalimantan. Although the community is institutionally affiliated with the Indonesian Evangelical Mission Church (Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia, GKII), a number of its members continue to practise traditional spiritual customs such as *Suli* (the belief in reincarnation) and *Belian* (a healing ritual rooted in ancestral traditions). This phenomenon is significant, as it reflects an ongoing negotiation of religious identity—one that shapes the community's understanding of life, death, and its relationship with ancestral heritage. While there is currently no national statistical data that captures the prevalence of such practices in quantitative terms, qualitative field data and ethnographic observations suggest that this case is far from isolated. Rather, it represents a broader pattern of religious and cultural dynamics found within many indigenous communities across Indonesia.

Previous research on the intersection between formal religion and indigenous belief systems has revealed a multifaceted and evolving field of inquiry. This body of literature can be categorised into three principal thematic areas. First, studies on syncretism and spiritual coexistence have highlighted the persistence of indigenous cosmologies alongside institutional religious doctrines. For instance, Thinane (2023) demonstrates how African Neo-Pentecostal Churches in South Africa subtly incorporate traditional practices such as the ritual use of holy water, while Ravichandran (2024) illustrates how Tamil folk religion in India weaves together Hindu, Christian, and Islamic elements into a coherent syncretic framework. Similarly, Anizoba and Aande (2021) examine how Igbo-speaking Christians in Nigeria maintain traditional beliefs such as divination while formally adhering to Christian theology. However, these studies primarily focus on Africa and South Asia, offering limited insight into comparable phenomena in Southeast Asian Christian contexts.

The second theme concerns the legal and socio-political recognition of indigenous religions. Willheim (2008) discusses the fundamental tensions between Aboriginal religious secrecy and the requirements of the Australian legal system, while Årsheim (2018) explores how legal systems in Canada and Norway variably accommodate or marginalise indigenous religious rights. Within the Indonesian context, Saptanno (2021) underscores how state-recognised religions dominate official discourse and interfaith platforms, frequently relegating indigenous spiritualities to the periphery. While these studies

offer crucial insights into the structural constraints imposed upon indigenous religions, they seldom explore how these dynamics unfold at the level of local religious communities, particularly in the context of doctrinal negotiation.

A third line of inquiry addresses cultural resilience and the functional adaptation of indigenous belief systems in contemporary society. Nti (2022), for example, reveals how African traditional religions contribute to economic development and community cohesion in Ghana, while Van Loi (2022) examines how ethnic minorities in Vietnam are reinterpreting ancestral practices in response to modernisation. In China, Xing and Huang (2023) document how the folk religion of the Tu ethnic group is actively supported through cultural preservation policies, reinforcing both social order and religious continuity. These studies, though valuable, tend to examine indigenous belief systems in isolation from formal religions, rarely engaging with instances in which both systems coexist and interact within the same institutional framework.

Despite these significant contributions, there remains a critical gap in the literature concerning how Christian communities in indigenous settings negotiate theological tensions when ancestral cosmologies—such as reincarnation—persist within the formal boundaries of church doctrine. Most extant studies concentrate either on Islam and Hinduism or treat indigenous traditions as separate from mainstream religious institutions. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating how the Dayak Tunjung Christian community in Lamin Teliha sustains traditional practices such as *Suli* (reincarnation) and *Belian* (ritual healing) within the ecclesiastical structure of the Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia (GKII). In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religious hybridity, cultural negotiation, and identity formation in contemporary Indonesia.

The primary aim of this research is to address the identified gap in existing scholarship by examining how a Christian indigenous community negotiates the persistence of ancestral cosmologies—particularly the belief in reincarnation—within the framework of formal ecclesiastical doctrine. Specifically, the study investigates the Dayak Tunjung community in Lamin Teliha, East Kalimantan, and how they maintain traditional beliefs and practices such as *Suli* (reincarnation) and *Belian* (ritual healing) within the structure of the Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia (GKII). By focusing on this community, the research seeks to uncover the theological, cultural, and social mechanisms that allow such beliefs to persist and be integrated into the lived religious experience of a formally Christian congregation. Through this analysis, the study offers a new perspective on religious hybridity, contributing to a deeper understanding of how doctrinal boundaries are negotiated at the grassroots level in indigenous Christian contexts—an area that remains significantly underexplored in current literature.

This study proceeds from the argument that religious identity in indigenous Christian communities is not merely the result of doctrinal acceptance but is continuously shaped through negotiation with long-standing cosmological frameworks embedded in cultural memory and social practice. Drawing on theories of syncretism (Shaw & Stewart, 2003) and lived religion (Orsi, 2005), the research posits that beliefs such as *Suli* (reincarnation) and practices like *Belian* (ritual healing) are not merely residual elements of pre-Christian traditions but constitute active, meaningful expressions of a hybrid religious worldview. These practices exemplify what Lambek (2010) refers to as "ethical pluralism," wherein individuals and communities navigate multiple normative systems—religious, cultural, ancestral—without necessarily seeking full reconciliation. Furthermore, the study is informed by the framework of vernacular religion (Orsi, 2005; Primiano, 2022), which emphasises the local, negotiated, and experiential dimensions of religious life as opposed to rigid institutional formulations. By applying these theoretical perspectives, the research seeks to interpret the Dayak Tunjung community's engagement with Christianity not as a linear conversion or rupture from the past, but as a complex layering of belief systems that reflect their cultural resilience and adaptive agency. This interpretative lens allows for a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of religiosity in contemporary Indonesia.

2. Methods

This research focuses on the belief in reincarnation (*Suli*) as it manifests in the religious practices of the Indonesian Evangelical Tent Church (*Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia*-GKII) congregation in Lamin

Telihan, whose members originate from the indigenous Dayak Tunjung community. The main objective of the study is to examine how this belief, which diverges from mainstream Christian doctrine, continues to persist and be enacted in daily religious life. The unit of analysis comprises individuals who are actively engaged in the community's spiritual life, including traditional leaders, community figures, church pastors, and congregation members with extensive knowledge and experience regarding the cultural and religious dynamics of Lamin Telihan.

A qualitative approach employing a Grounded Theory design was used for this study (Moleong, 1989; Wijaya, 2018). This approach was chosen due to its suitability in uncovering the social construction of belief in *Suli* and its integration into the local religious system. Grounded Theory is particularly appropriate as it enables the researcher to build theoretical understanding from the ground up, based on empirical data gathered in the field (Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). Furthermore, it allows for exploring complex religious phenomena that formal theological frameworks may not adequately represent.

Primary data were obtained from key informants, including traditional elders, community leaders, members of the Church Council (*Badan Pengurus Jemaat*), and the GKII pastor in Lamin Telihan. Interviews were also conducted with congregation members who possess a deep understanding or lived experience of the continued practice of *Suli* and the traditional healing ritual known as *Belian*. Secondary data were collected through participant observation of community activities, informal conversations, and small group discussions, all of which provided valuable socio-cultural context for interpreting the community's religious practices. A triangulation strategy was employed to enhance the validity and depth of the information drawn from these varied sources.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and narrative documentation (Luthfiyah, 2018). Interviews were guided by open-ended questions to elicit personal narratives and collective experiences regarding reincarnation and healing practices. Participant observation was conducted during a range of ritual and religious events, supported by field notes, audio recordings, and transcribed narratives from informants. All data collection was undertaken with informed consent and in adherence to ethical research standards communicated to all participants.

Data were analysed through the stages of Grounded Theory as outlined by Budiasih (2014) and Charmaz & Thornberg (2021), beginning with open coding to identify key themes in the qualitative data, followed by axial coding to explore connections among emerging categories. The final stage involved selective coding to articulate the central phenomenon explaining the persistence of belief in *Suli* within the Christian life of the community. The analysis was inductive, aiming to generate theory directly from lived experience and the social constructions of the community, thereby contributing to scholarly discourse on syncretism, lived religion, and ethical pluralism within the religious practices of Indonesia's indigenous communities.

3. Results

Persistence of the Reincarnation Belief (Suli) in Lamin Telihan

The Dayak Tunjung people, a sub-ethnic group of the Dayak from East Kalimantan, originally resided in the West Kutai region before migrating to several other areas across the province, including the location now known as Lamin Telihan. Prior to their settlement, this area was called *Berambai* and was inhabited by the Tuana people. This indigenous group believed in the presence of ancestral spirits and guardian beings within their village. The migration process was not peaceful. According to a local traditional leader, Mr Basran, the Tunjung people conquered the Tuana and claimed control over *Berambai*, renaming it *Lamin Telihan* (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

During this period of colonisation, the Dayak Tunjung community was governed by a traditional leadership structure headed by a *Singa* (literally meaning "lion"), which was hierarchically organised into several levels. These included *Lengkur* as the First Lion, *Mentingq* as the Second Lion, *Amas* as the Third Lion, and *Rangga* as the Fourth Lion. This structure is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Traditional Leadership Structure of the Dayak Tunjung during the Colonial Period

| No. | Name | Council Name | Position |
|-----|----------|---------------|-------------|
| 1 | Lengkur | Rempeh | First Lion |
| 2 | Mentingq | Baris / Losot | Second Lion |
| 3 | Amas | Mpo Rupa | Third Lion |
| 4 | Rangga | Lawas | Fourth Lion |

Following the conquest of *Berambai*, children within the Tunjung community began to exhibit unusual phenomena that were interpreted as signs of reincarnation. These children were reported to recall the lives of deceased Tuana individuals, despite never having been taught about them or heard their stories. Some also bore physical marks, such as scars or birthmarks, which the local community believed to be evidence that the spirits of Tuana ancestors had been reborn in the bodies of Tunjung children.

These children were never taught about who used to live in this village, yet they could name Tuana people who had long passed away. Some even had strange marks on their bodies—like wounds—which we believe are signs of *Suli* (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

These phenomena later formed the initial foundation for the emergence of the belief in reincarnation among the Dayak Tunjung people—a belief locally known as *Suli*, meaning “to be born again” (Andrerina, 2017; Matlock, 2019). This belief was not merely perceived as an extraordinary spiritual occurrence, but evolved into an integral framework for understanding social and cultural life in Lamin Teliha. Over time, *Suli* became widely accepted and transmitted across generations as a way to explain the cycle of life and death. In this context, death is not viewed as an end, but rather as a transitional phase leading to a new birth. As such, the belief in *Suli* remains alive and deeply rooted in the community’s collective consciousness, continuing to serve as a spiritual foundation in navigating daily life.

According to Mr Basran, a traditional elder of Lamin Teliha, the belief in *Suli* began to take root after the Dayak Tunjung community succeeded in conquering and displacing the Tuana people from the *Berambai* area.

After we settled here, children started speaking as if they knew who used to live in this village, even though they had never heard those stories from anyone. Some children were also born with strange marks on their bodies, which we believed were signs that the Tuana’s spirits had returned to life. For the community, such incidents were not considered ordinary, but rather as spiritual evidence that ancestral spirits—or the souls of the deceased—could reincarnate into the bodies of new human beings, particularly children (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

From observations conducted during fieldwork, several cases were identified in which children exhibited traits believed to be indicators of reincarnation. For instance, a five-year-old girl in Lamin Teliha was reported to have mentioned the name and habits of an individual from the past—someone unknown to her extended family. Upon further inquiry, she mentioned that the name belonged to a former *Tuana* figure who once lived in *Berambai*. In addition, the child had a birthmark resembling an old wound on her hand, which, according to local villagers, was believed to be a physical sign from a previous life. Such phenomena correspond with findings from Matlock’s (2019) research on reincarnation, which notes that children believed to be reincarnated often exhibit *birthmarks* or *birth defects* thought to be linked to the cause of death in a previous existence.

The belief in *Suli* is not merely a spiritual narrative but has developed into a conceptual framework through which the community understands the cycle of life. In Lamin Teliha, life after death is not seen as an ending, but rather as a transition towards rebirth in a new form. This contrasts the linear view found in Christian doctrine, which sharply distinguishes between earthly life and the afterlife. With *Suli*, the community has its own means of explaining death, while also fostering emotional and

spiritual continuity with their ancestors. This tradition simultaneously strengthens intergenerational solidarity in preserving cultural heritage and local spirituality.

Moreover, belief in *Suli* is not solely anchored in personal experiences—it is reinforced by collective narratives handed down across generations. The people of Lamin Telihan believe that spirits of those who had unresolved matters in life or who died under unnatural circumstances may return through a new birth. Such stories have become part of local folklore, often told by parents to their children, especially when certain signs appear—such as unusual behaviour or an inexplicable emotional bond between a child and an elderly person. In Dayak Tunjung society, such oddities are not regarded as medical issues but rather as signs that the soul of an ancestor is *re-emerging* in the body of a newly born child.

One of the most significant social practices arising from the belief in *Suli* is the *Mosi* ritual. This ritual is performed by a customary leader on children believed to be reincarnated beings. According to Mr Basri, a traditional elder in Lamin Telihan, children who are thought to have undergone reincarnation often suffer from health disturbances, which are interpreted as residual afflictions carried over from their previous lives. To alleviate this suffering, the *Mosi*—a form of spiritual cleansing ritual—is conducted using a special type of powder that is applied to the child's body. This powder is believed to symbolise the severing of ties between the old spirit and the new body, thus allowing the child to live their new life free from spiritual interference (Personal Communication, July 23, 2021). This ritual is not merely symbolic but also serves as a communal means of reaffirming the role of customary leaders and the importance of maintaining a balance between the physical and spiritual realms.

The practice of *Mosi* does not solely aim to bring spiritual healing; it also reinforces the cultural identity of the Lamin Telihan community. In its execution, relatives and community members often witness the ritual, creating a space for strengthening solidarity and preserving local traditions. Even though the majority of residents have embraced Christianity, the *Mosi* ritual continues to be performed—either discreetly or alongside other traditional ceremonies. This indicates that *Suli* is deeply embedded in the community's value system, transcending the formal boundaries of religion and institutional structures. The enduring belief in reincarnation lives on because it provides a meaningful and relevant spiritual explanation for everyday human experiences—particularly those related to birth, death, and intergenerational connections.

The belief in *Suli* among the Dayak Tunjung community in Lamin Telihan cannot be understood as a standalone religious phenomenon; rather, it results from a complex interplay between collective history, communal spiritual experiences, and local narratives passed down through generations. The process of colonising the *Tuana* people, the spiritual experiences of children who exhibited signs of reincarnation, and the social practice of the *Mosi* ritual all contribute to a living belief system that is actively sustained within the community's cultural memory. *Suli* reflects the community's unique understanding of death, life, and the relationship between the physical world and ancestral spirits. It further demonstrates how such beliefs are deeply rooted in cultural practices extending far beyond institutional religion's formal boundaries.

In summary, the belief in *Suli* among the Dayak Tunjung community in Lamin Telihan is rooted in the conviction that the souls of the deceased can reincarnate into the bodies of children. This phenomenon is believed to manifest through signs such as a child's ability to recall past lives without being taught about them and birthmarks or scars thought to be traces of a previous existence. This belief is not only spiritual in nature. However, it is also accompanied by a social practice known as the *Mosi* ritual—an act of spiritual redemption performed by customary leaders to sever the bond between the old spirit and the new body. Through this ritual, the child believed to be reincarnated may live a healthy life free from disturbances caused by the spirit of the past.

Field findings reveal several patterns that demonstrate how the belief in *Suli* is firmly embedded within the social and spiritual fabric of Lamin Telihan society. First, *Suli* emerged as a result of the socio-cultural transition following the colonisation of the Berambai area by the Dayak Tunjung, who displaced the *Tuana* people—forming a new collective memory that merged historical narrative with spiritual belief. Second, spiritual phenomena such as children recalling past lives and the appearance

of birthmarks are interpreted as physical evidence of reincarnation, further reinforcing the community's conviction in the validity of these experiences. Third, customary figures like Mr Basri play a vital role in performing the *Mosi* ritual, which, though symbolic, also demonstrates that this belief is embedded within an organised social structure and holds customary legitimacy. Fourth, the presence of syncretism between traditional beliefs and Christianity is evident in the continued practice of *Mosi*, even though the majority of residents now identify as Christians. This indicates that the belief system has adapted and continues to coexist within layered forms of communal faith.

The findings of this study reinforce the argument that religious identity within indigenous Christian communities such as the Dayak Tunjung in Lamin Telihan is not shaped solely through the acceptance of institutional doctrine, but rather through ongoing negotiation with a cosmological framework deeply embedded in their cultural memory and social practices. Belief in *Suli* (reincarnation) and the *Mosi* ritual as a spiritual response to experiences of life and death should not be viewed merely as remnants of pre-Christian traditions. Instead, they represent an active expression of what Shaw and Stewart (2003) refer to as *syncretism*—a creative process of synthesising old and new belief systems. Within the framework of *lived religion* (Orsi, 2005), the belief in *Suli* reflects a form of religiosity that is alive, contextual, and rooted in daily experience, far removed from the mere recitation of doctrinal teachings.

Furthermore, religious practices such as *Suli* and *Belian* illustrate the existence of ethical pluralism (Lambek, 2010), namely the community's capacity to live within multiple normative systems—Christianity, ancestral customs, and local cosmology—without the need to consolidate them into a single unified system. Even within the framework of vernacular religion (Orsi, 2005; Primiano, 2022), the religiosity of the Dayak Tunjung can be understood as a form of local adaptation and creativity in reinterpreting religious meaning, rather than as inconsistency. In this context, the belief in *Suli* not only provides an explanation for the community's understanding of death and rebirth, but also reveals how local spirituality can endure, evolve, and integrate within new belief configurations. Rather than viewing religious conversion as a linear and final process, this approach offers a more inclusive and sensitive understanding of religiosity in contemporary Indonesia—where religious identity is shaped through complex layers of culture, history, and lived experience.

The Role and Meaning of the Belian Ritual in Contemporary Practice

The *Belian* ritual is one of the most significant customary ceremonies within the spiritual life of the Dayak Tunjung community in Lamin Telihan. It is performed as a means of seeking healing from ancestral spirits. According to local elder Mr Basran, *Belian* is a major ritual led by a customary leader who has long served the community and is authorised to conduct various traditional rites (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021). Far from being merely a cultural relic, the *Belian* ritual serves as a sacred medium through which the community maintains a balance between the human realm and the spirit world. The ritual leader initiates the ceremony by calling upon the ancestral spirits and appealing for the illness afflicting an individual to be cured by the supernatural forces recognised by the Dayak Tunjung people (Basri, Personal Communication, July 23, 2021).

At the heart of the *Belian* ritual lies the belief that when someone falls ill, their *jus* (life soul) has left their body and must be restored through the mediation of ritual in order for the person to regain health (Julianus, Devung, & Samdirgawijaya, 2021). This process is led by a *pemeliat* (healer or shaman) who is experienced in reading sacred chants, facilitating spiritual communication with ancestral spirits (*liau*), and preparing herbal medicines from forest plants. The ritual typically lasts throughout the night and begins with the preparation of offerings placed at the centre of the room as a tribute to the ancestral spirits. In certain cases, animals such as pigs are also offered as a form of petition for healing (Sucipto, 2025).

In the middle of the night, the *pemeliat* (healer or shaman) may experience a trance or spirit possession, which is taken as a sign that the spirit afflicting the patient has accepted the offering and is willing to “return” the person's *jus* (life soul). The effects of the ritual are not limited to the physical changes observed in the patient—such as regaining movement or renewed vitality—but also extend to

the psychological and spiritual well-being experienced by both the patient and their family. As noted by Ag, a member of the Dayak Tunjung community (Personal Communication, April 25, 2021), many believe that following the *Belian* ritual, the sick often show signs of recovery and increased zest for life. A psychological study by Nina Anggita Putri (2017) similarly found that the suggestion and belief in *Belian* significantly influence the healing process. Thus, *Belian* is not merely a traditional medical practice; it is a sacred space where belief, culture, and hope for healing converge.

Despite the fact that the majority of residents in Lamin Telihan now identify as Christians, the *Belian* ritual continues to be practised by some as a form of reverence for ancestral tradition. The persistence of this ritual underscores the resilience of cultural and traditional beliefs in the face of religious transformation. Mr Basran emphasised that community members still find it difficult to abandon their ancestral customs, as rituals such as *Belian* are regarded as integral to their collective identity—something that must be preserved (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021). In this light, *Belian* is not simply a relic of ancient spirituality, but rather a symbol of cultural continuity that remains alive even amidst shifting religious landscapes.

Belian has long been an inseparable part of the Dayak Tunjung tradition, tracing back to the time when the community still lived in West Kutai. According to Mr Basran, this ritual was well known to their ancestors and was carried with them during their migration to Lamin Telihan. The endurance of the practice across generations indicates that *Belian* is not a temporary or regionally bound tradition, but rather an element of collective memory and communal spirituality that has become embedded in their historical journey of migration and social transformation (Basran, Personal Communication, April 20, 2021).

In contemporary times, despite significant religious and social transformations within the Lamin Telihan community, *Belian* continues to be upheld as a symbol of ethnic identity and pride. It functions not only as a healing ritual but also as a medium for transmitting ancestral values and marking the continuity of Dayak Tunjung culture amidst the pressures of modernisation and external religious influences. By preserving this practice, the community implicitly affirms that local spirituality can coexist with new belief systems without losing its meaning or social function.

The endurance of the *Belian* ritual is closely tied to the community's social structure and the preservation of traditional roles that remain strictly maintained within the Dayak Tunjung society in Lamin Telihan. As a sacred ceremony imbued with spiritual significance, *Belian* is carried out by individuals who hold inherited and highly specialised roles, passed down through generations. Its performance involves intricate symbolic arrangements and ceremonial procedures that reveal the depth of local cosmology and reinforce the central role of spiritual leaders such as the *pemeliat* (healer or shaman) within the customary hierarchy.

To further understand how *Belian* is conducted and who is involved in its process, the following table 3 outlines the ritual's role structure and the symbolic elements accompanying its enactment.

Table 3. Role Structure in the Dayak Tunjung Belian Ritual

| No | Role | Primary Duties |
|----|--------------------------|---|
| 1 | <i>Pemeliat</i> (shaman) | Leads the ritual, chants incantations, summons ancestral spirits (liau), prepares herbal remedies |
| 2 | <i>Penata Sesaji</i> | Arranges offerings for the spirits and prepares the ritual space |
| 3 | <i>Pembantu Ritual</i> | Prepares ritual tools such as containers, ritual powder, and animal offerings |
| 4 | Family of the Patient | Provides information on the illness and follows the <i>pemeliat</i> 's instructions |

The symbolism within the *Belian* ritual holds profound significance. For instance, the incantations (*mantra*) recited by the *pemeliat* (shaman) are believed to serve as a bridge between the human world and the spirit realm. The offerings (*sesaji*), arranged in the centre of the ceremonial space, typically include food, drink, incense, and occasionally animals such as pigs. These offerings are considered acts of reverence and supplication, aimed at appealing to the ancestors for their assistance in the healing

process. Furthermore, the *pemeliat* often brings ritual tools composed of leaves, roots, and powders derived from forest plants—these are not only intended as physical remedies but are primarily aimed at healing the *jus* (soul), which is believed to have been separated from the sufferer's body.

One of the most striking symbols within this ceremony is the *pemeliat*'s trance or spirit possession, which is regarded as confirmation that an ancestral or disease-related spirit is present and prepared to engage in negotiation. This moment marks the most sacred phase of the ritual, when spiritual communication reaches its climax and the decision for healing is believed to be granted. The phenomenon of possession during *Belian* is not perceived as mere theatricality; rather, it is socially accepted as validation of the *pemeliat*'s legitimacy and the spiritual authenticity of the entire ritual process (Sucipto, 2025).

By maintaining a well-organised structure of customary roles alongside rich and meaningful symbolism, the *Belian* ritual functions not only as a means of spiritual healing for the Dayak Tunjung community but also as a reflection of their social order and the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and ancestral spirits. Every element of the ritual—from the *mantra* and offerings to the trance state of the *pemeliat*—is imbued with symbolic meaning that reinforces community solidarity and affirms cultural identity. As such, *Belian* cannot be understood solely as a spiritual practice; it must also be recognised as a social and cultural medium that plays a vital role in maintaining cosmic balance, preserving ancestral heritage, and collectively responding to the challenges of an evolving world. A deeper understanding of this practice opens up analytical space for exploring how the Lamin Telihan community negotiates their local spirituality amidst modernity and emerging religious influences.

From the various data presented, several key patterns emerge. First, *Belian* represents a continuity of tradition carried from the time of migration from West Kutai, reflecting the strength of collective memory passed down through generations. Second, despite religious transformations within the community, *Belian* continues to be practised as both a healing ritual and a statement of cultural identity—demonstrating that modernisation has not entirely erased local practices. Third, the social structure that governs the performance of the ritual, particularly the role of the *pemeliat* (traditional healer or shaman), indicates that *Belian* is not an individual act but a well-organised communal practice. Fourth, the symbolism embedded in the ritual—such as the *mantra* (sacred incantations) and spirit possession—reveals the existence of a sophisticated and enduring local cosmology. The preliminary conclusion is that *Belian* continues to exist not merely as a means of healing, but as a support system for the social and spiritual framework of the community.

These findings reinforce the argument that religious identity in indigenous communities is not formed solely through the adoption of formal doctrines, but through continuous negotiation with traditional cosmological frameworks deeply rooted in cultural memory and social practices (Orsi, 2005; Shaw & Stewart, 2003). *Belian* survives not only as a healing ritual, but as an active expression of *vernacular religion*—a form of religion that is lived in everyday life, deeply local, and rich in symbolic meaning. In this regard, the *Belian* ritual reflects *ethical pluralism* (Lambek, 2010), wherein communities are able to live within two normative systems simultaneously: Christianity and ancestral beliefs. These data expand our understanding of how indigenous communities in Indonesia respond to modernisation and religious change without losing their spiritual heritage, showing that syncretism is not a passive compromise but an active strategy to preserve cultural identity and local spirituality.

Reincarnation Beliefs within the GKII Congregation's Christian Worldview

Within the religious life of the *Gereja Kemah Injil Indonesia* (GKII – Evangelical Tent Church of Indonesia) congregation in Lamin Telihan, there exists a unique and at times challenging dynamic of coexistence between the traditional Dayak Tunjung belief in *Suli* (reincarnation) and the Christian doctrine to which the community adheres. On one hand, Christianity—with its linear teaching on the afterlife involving heaven and hell—has become the official religion embraced by the majority. On the other hand, the belief that ancestral spirits can be "born again" into the bodies of children continues to persist in the spiritual practices and consciousness of some church members.

This phenomenon creates a tension that is not always openly visible but manifests in the form of *syncretism*, narrative adaptation, and even theological discomfort in everyday spiritual life. Some individuals acknowledge that they worship in church and believe in Jesus Christ, yet within the familial and customary context, they still recognise the possibility of *Suli*—especially when children are born with "unusual" birthmarks believed to be signs of a returning soul. This tension demonstrates that religious conversion does not necessarily erase the deeply rooted cosmological heritage embedded in local culture over generations.

The belief in reincarnation among GKII Lamin Telihan members cannot be separated from the enduring cultural roots of the Dayak Tunjung people, which continue to be actively lived and transmitted across generations. Culture in this sense is not merely an inherited custom, but a value system that shapes the community's worldview on life, death, and their relationship with the ancestors. As Koentjaraningrat (2005) notes, culture consists of elements such as knowledge, beliefs, technology, and social systems that form collective behaviour. In the Dayak Tunjung context, belief in *Suli* or rebirth is part of a broader belief system integrated with rituals like *Belian* (a traditional healing ritual) and various forms of ancestral veneration.

Mr Basran, a customary leader (*tokoh adat*) of Lamin Telihan, stated that many elders in the village continue to hold firmly to ancestral traditions and believe that all inherited customary beliefs must be preserved by future generations. "*We cannot abandon what our ancestors have taught us. It is part of our life,*" he remarked (Personal Communication, April 20, 2021). This conviction is reflected in the daily life of the Lamin Telihan community, which continues to observe cultural practices such as the *Belian* ritual (a traditional healing ceremony), the use of customary symbols, and the belief in signs of reincarnation in children. Even within a community that has formally embraced Christianity, culture remains a strong spiritual foundation, giving rise to a layered belief system that is not easily erased by new religious doctrines.

Furthermore, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) emphasises that culture is a symbolic system through which human actions gain meaning. In this context, belief in reincarnation is not merely a spiritual doctrine but a way for the community to interpret their existential experiences within a symbolic framework passed down across generations. Thus, although a process of religious conversion to Christianity has occurred, the symbolic structure of Dayak Tunjung culture has not simply vanished; rather, it has transformed and coexists *syncretically* with the new faith. In other words, culture serves as a vessel that enables the continuity of reincarnation beliefs, while simultaneously acting as a space of identity negotiation between the past and the present.

Social factors also play a significant role in sustaining the belief in reincarnation within the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation. In the everyday lives of the Dayak Tunjung people, social interaction is not merely a means of communication, but also a vital channel for transmitting cultural values and spiritual beliefs. From an early age, community members are accustomed to absorbing information from their surroundings through interaction with parents, customary elders (*tetua adat*), and fellow community members. Within this context, belief in *Suli* (reincarnation) is indirectly taught and internalised through everyday conversations, family stories, and collective narratives passed down from one generation to the next.

Kenli Kusnadi (Personal Communication, January 04, 2021), the Regional Secretary of Lamin Telihan, explained that his community is known for its strong sense of social solidarity,

Here, we are used to helping one another. We practise *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) in village matters, family events, and religious affairs. We also share stories about family, customs, and beliefs at every gathering.

This openness in communication enables cultural values, including belief in reincarnation, to continue flowing and be preserved within the community's collective life. Interactive spaces such as customary rituals, family gatherings, and cooperative communal activities serve as important mediums for sustaining and reproducing traditional beliefs.

The social processes in Lamin Telihan are not vertically institutional, as often found in formal religious structures, but rather horizontally communal. In other words, values and beliefs develop

through egalitarian social relations, where every individual acts as an agent in reproducing culture through daily narratives and practices. In this regard, belief in *Suli* is not transmitted through sermons or written dogma, but through lived experiences and the telling of emotionally and spiritually powerful local stories. For example, when a child displays signs believed to indicate reincarnation, the story quickly spreads and is discussed within the community, reinforcing the collective narrative that ancestral spirits can indeed “return” in new bodies.

Thus, social factors function as an ecosystem that enables the endurance of ancestral beliefs amidst the dynamics of religious and cultural change. Social processes such as interpersonal communication, *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), and communal participation in rituals create a conducive environment for preserving traditional belief systems. This illustrates that in Indigenous communities such as the Dayak Tunjung, spirituality is not solely about doctrine, but is interwoven into a living and active social network. Belief in reincarnation becomes part of the communal identity, shaped by daily social relations—an identity not easily erased by institutional shifts or religious conversion.

The implications of belief in *Suli* (reincarnation) for the Christian view of death within the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation are significant. In Christian tradition, death is understood as a consequence of original sin, and one’s faith and deeds determine life after death during life. Those who believe in Christ are promised eternal life in heaven, whereas those who do not face judgement and eternal punishment (Beyer, 1980). However, this narrative becomes more complex in Lamin Telihan, where many congregation members continue to hold the belief that death is not an end, but a passage towards rebirth.

Pastor Yunus Hadi Balan, the leader of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation, expressed that many of his parishioners experience spiritual dilemmas. On one hand, they profess Jesus Christ as their Saviour, but on the other, they continue to believe that those who die will be reborn into the world in a new body. He stated,

There are members of the congregation who fear death because they feel burdened by sin, but when they recall the belief in reincarnation, their fear disappears. They believe they will be reborn and will have the chance to improve their lives in the future” (Yunus Hadi Balan, Personal Communication, July 01, 2021).

This belief also manifests in everyday practices. Some members of the congregation associate the death and resurrection of Jesus with the possibility of “rising again” in the form of reincarnation. A member of the *Badan Pengurus Jemaat* (BPJ, or Church Governing Council) even mentioned that certain families immediately encase the graves of deceased relatives in concrete to prevent their spirits from rising and undergoing reincarnation (Yunus Hadi Balan, Personal Communication, July 01, 2021). This narrative reveals a layered symbolic understanding—linking the theological resurrection of Jesus with the Dayak cosmological concept of being reborn into a new body.

This situation illustrates that, for members of the GKII congregation in Lamin Telihan, *Suli* serves as a spiritual “alternative path” that offers hope and redemption beyond the framework of heavenly judgement. In this context, belief in heaven and hell is not entirely rejected but negotiated alongside a pre-existing local cosmology. As a result, a unique form of Christianity emerges—shaped by Christian missionary influence but still framed by local spiritual values and narratives. As Galadari (2012) explains that such a fusion can give rise to a faith that is not singular but rather complex and multilayered, in which individuals adopt elements of a new religion while preserving traditional beliefs that continue to provide meaning in everyday life.

Thus, *Suli* not only transforms perceptions of death but also reshapes the spiritual structure of the community: from a linear system (life, death, heaven/hell) to a cyclical one (life, death, rebirth). This challenges orthodox theology while also demonstrating how local and global religious traditions interact and co-exist within the religious life of multicultural communities like Lamin Telihan. The belief in *Suli* within the Christian worldview of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation reflects an ongoing negotiation of faith and religious identity. Amidst the dominant Christian doctrine of salvation and eternal life, *Suli* endures as an alternative narrative that offers hope for rebirth, particularly for those who feel unworthy of entering heaven. This belief is not merely a form of resistance to new

teachings, but rather an expression of a long-standing cultural heritage embedded within the social and spiritual fabric of the Dayak Tunjung community. Hence, practices such as concreting graves or reinterpreting the resurrection of Jesus become tangible manifestations of how traditional beliefs and formal religious teachings intersect, engage in dialogue, and give rise to a unique religious configuration.

The following section presents visual data and direct quotations from key community figures to understand better how this dynamic unfolds in practice. Table 4 summarises the key points of integration between Christian beliefs and the belief in reincarnation (*Suli*) within the worldview of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation.

Table 4. Integration of Reincarnation Beliefs into the Christian Worldview

| Aspect | Traditional Christian Belief | Reincarnation Belief (<i>Suli</i>) | Impact on the Congregation |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| View of Death | Death as the end of earthly life, leading to heaven or hell | Death as a transition towards rebirth | A cyclical view increasingly accepted among some members |
| Life After Death | Eternal life in heaven for those who believe in Christ | All people may be reborn, with no concept of hell | Reduces fear of death and judgement |
| Symbolic Practices | Christian burial, prayers for the release of the soul | Concreting graves to prevent the spirit from returning | Concreting becomes a collective symbol of local belief |
| Emotional Impact | Anxiety over sin and eternal judgement | Belief in a second chance to correct past wrongs | Offers additional spiritual comfort and hope |

The previous sections have illustrated that within the religious life of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation, two belief systems coexist side by side: Christian doctrine and the traditional Dayak Tunjung belief in reincarnation (*Suli*—meaning "to be born again"). Although, institutionally, the majority of the community has embraced Christianity and regularly worships in church, they continue to hold onto ancestral cultural values, including the belief that the soul of a deceased person can be reborn in another human body. This belief is not only privately held but is also socially practised through family narratives, cultural rituals, and symbolic actions such as the concreting of graves.

From the gathered data, several key patterns emerge. First, there is a coexistence of belief, where Christianity and *Suli* do not cancel each other out but are practised in tandem in everyday life. Second, cultural and social factors play a crucial role in sustaining belief in reincarnation, especially through narrative transmission within families and communal activities like *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). Third, there exists a local interpretation of Christian doctrine—such as equating the resurrection of Jesus with the process of reincarnation—revealing the community's effort to bridge two different spiritual frameworks. Fourth, belief in *Suli* offers an alternative psychological mechanism for congregants in facing death—not with fear of judgement, but with hope for a second chance at life. Overall, these patterns indicate that the belief in *Suli* persists because it is deeply integrated within the culture and social structure of the community.

These findings reaffirm that belief in reincarnation among the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation is not merely a residual aspect of the old faith, but an active part of an ongoing negotiation of religious identity within a local cultural context. In line with the argument that indigenous Christian identity is shaped not solely by doctrinal acceptance but also by socially inherited cosmological frameworks, beliefs such as *Suli* and practices like *Belian* (a traditional healing ritual) reflect a complex and layered form of lived religion. Through the lens of syncretism (Shaw & Stewart, 2003), ethical pluralism (Lambek, 2010), and vernacular religion (Orsi, 2005; Primiano, 2022), this study shows that the Dayak Tunjung community did not undergo a linear religious conversion. Instead, they have constructed a

hybrid religious configuration that merges Christianity with ancestral spirituality—an embodiment of cultural resilience and adaptive agency in the face of religious and societal change.

4. Discussion

This study reveals that belief in reincarnation (*Suli*) and the practice of traditional healing rituals (*Belian*) continue to hold a strong presence in the religious life of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation, despite the community's institutional conversion to Christianity. Findings indicate that these two traditions are not only culturally inherited but are actively sustained through collective narratives, customary social structures, and daily spiritual practices. In everyday life, Christian teachings and the traditional Dayak Tunjung belief system do not negate each other. Instead, they coexist within a syncretic and contextual religious configuration. The belief in *Suli* provides an alternative interpretation of life after death that differs from conventional Christian doctrine, while *Belian* serves both as a healing medium and a symbol of cultural continuity. This suggests that religious conversion within this community is not a rupture, but rather a complex, layered negotiation of spiritual identity.

These findings emerge from the fact that the religious identity of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation has not been shaped linearly through doctrinal acceptance alone. Rather, it is continually negotiated in relation to a cosmological framework deeply rooted in the community's cultural memory and social practices. Belief in *Suli* and the performance of *Belian* are not remnants of passive pre-Christian beliefs but are active expressions of how the community understands the relationship between life, death, and the spirit world. This aligns with the theory of syncretism (Shaw & Stewart, 2003), which asserts that new and old belief systems do not necessarily replace each other, but may blend into a hybrid religious configuration. In the context of Lamin Telihan, belief in reincarnation provides a psychological and spiritual space for congregants to interpret death and salvation more inclusively—an interpretation not always adequately represented within institutional Christian doctrine.

Furthermore, the persistence of these beliefs can also be attributed to the strong social and symbolic functions they serve in everyday life. From the perspective of lived religion (Orsi, 2005), practices such as *Mosi* (a cleansing or appeasement ritual) and *Belian* are not merely ceremonial acts, but deeply meaningful religious experiences, both personally and communally. These traditions allow the community to integrate Christian spiritual values with ancestral heritage without feeling compelled to reject one entirely. This exemplifies a form of ethical pluralism (Lambek, 2010), wherein individuals simultaneously live out their religious identities through multiple normative systems. By interpreting reincarnation beliefs and healing rituals as part of vernacular religion (Orsi, 2005; Primiano, 2022), this study demonstrates that the spirituality of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation is shaped by a dynamic negotiation between Christian teachings and local cosmology—reflecting both cultural resilience and the community's adaptive capacity in the face of change.

The persistence of *Belian* and *Suli* among the Dayak Tunjung Christian community in Lamin Telihan resonates with global studies on syncretism within indigenous Christian settings. For instance, in India, Robinson (2009) explains how popular Christianity dynamically interacts with local Hindu practices, forming religious configurations that are both complex and at times contested. Similarly, Atungbou (2024) highlights the *Heraka* movement in Northeast India as a syncretic expression that emerged as both a response to external religious influence and a reformist movement within traditional belief systems. These parallels suggest that the negotiation between Christianity and indigenous traditions is not unique to the Dayak Tunjung but reflects a broader pattern in the global history of religious transmission among indigenous communities.

However, this study diverges from previous findings in its focus on the belief in reincarnation (*Suli*), which notably persists within a Christian community—despite the fact that reincarnation is doctrinally rejected by mainstream Christian teaching. Malkovsky (2017) and Davis (2015) emphasise the incompatibility between reincarnation and Christian eschatology, while Di Muzio (2013) highlights the moral debates surrounding divine justice and eternal punishment. This is where the novelty of the current research lies: it demonstrates how the Dayak Tunjung community has managed to integrate the

belief in rebirth as a legitimate framework of spiritual interpretation, without negating their Christian identity. This reflects a form of ethical pluralism and theological adaptation that remains largely unexplored in the Indonesian context.

Furthermore, from the perspective of vernacular religion—that is, religion as lived and expressed within local contexts—this study reinforces the argument that contextual religious practices such as *Belian* (healing rituals) and *Mosi* (rituals of spiritual cleansing or release) are not merely remnants of the past, but are meaningful and vibrant expressions of faith embedded in the everyday life of the community. The work of Bowman and Valk (2012, 2014) on everyday religion shows that local forms of religiosity often have greater influence on people's spiritual experiences than institutional doctrine. In a similar vein, Illman and Czimbalmos (2020) developed an analytical model to trace how knowing, being, and doing religion unfold in the lived experiences of religious communities. This study contributes to and expands on these findings by offering a concrete case study of an indigenous Dayak community that not only practises faith in a contextualised manner but also exhibits cultural resilience and engages in active negotiation to preserve their inherited spiritual traditions.

This study contributes to the literature on hybrid religion and ethical pluralism (Lambek, 2010) by emphasising how individuals and communities can simultaneously engage with multiple normative systems without the need to reduce or reconcile them into a singular, unified framework. This distinguishes the present research from studies such as that of Trigger and Asche (2010) in Australia, which focused more on negotiations over land and sea rights within a religious context. In contrast, this study highlights how the negotiation of beliefs occurs directly within spiritual spaces and communal worship settings.

The findings carry significant implications for understanding religious dynamics within indigenous communities, particularly in Indonesia's multicultural and multi-faith context. Socially, the data reveal that indigenous groups like the Dayak Tunjung possess the capacity to maintain their cultural and spiritual identity without being in direct conflict with the official religion they adhere to. This supports Primiano's (2022) argument that *vernacular religion* is not merely a form of 'folk religion', but rather an authentic expression of religiosity shaped by lived experience and local context. Historically, the findings reinforce the idea that religious conversion in Indonesia has not been a singular event severing ties with the past, but rather an ongoing journey filled with negotiation between ancestral heritage and new belief systems—an observation also echoed in Robinson's (2009) work on the dynamics of Christianity blending with local traditions in India.

The implication here is that religious understanding in indigenous communities cannot be reduced to dogmatic compliance alone; it must encompass daily practices, spiritual experiences, and collective memory that inform their worldview. Ideologically, this study invites us to view religion not as a closed and uniform system, but as an open space that allows for diversity, inclusivity, and hybridity (Shaw & Stewart, 2003). In doing so, this research contributes to the development of a more contextual, dialogical, and culturally sensitive discourse on religion, particularly in relation to local community realities.

Reflections on the findings also reveal ambivalent implications—offering both functional and potentially dysfunctional outcomes. On the one hand, the continuity of belief systems such as *Suli* (reincarnation) and *Belian* (traditional healing ritual) illustrates their positive function: preserving cultural identity, strengthening communal solidarity, and fostering a more inclusive spiritual framework within the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation. This provides space for religion to serve as a dynamic cultural force that is responsive to local contexts. As Bowman and Valk (2012) assert, religion in everyday life plays a crucial role in creating meaning and social order through practices that do not always align with institutional structures. The *Belian* ritual, as a form of healing, and the belief in *Suli* as an alternative eschatological narrative, attest to the adaptive and evolving nature of indigenous spirituality—it is far from static, continuously transforming in creative response to social change.

However, dysfunction may arise in the form of internal tension within the community due to differing interpretations between official church doctrine and local belief practices. Such conflict can potentially generate exclusion of individuals or groups who continue to uphold their traditional beliefs.

De Juan (2015) and Gebert et al. (2011) noted that intra-religious competition and varying degrees of tolerance can exacerbate dysfunction within religious communities. Additionally, local practices such as *Suli* (reincarnation) and *Belian* (traditional healing ritual) may be subject to stigmatisation and delegitimisation by religious institutions, which often regard them as deviations from official doctrine (Judd & Vandenberg, 2014; Pimentel & Melander, 2019). This process has implications not only on a spiritual level but also on a social one, where indigenous communities risk losing their bargaining power within religious and state power structures (Carter, 2022; Faundez, 2009). If not wisely mediated, such marginalisation may undermine the capacity of indigenous communities to preserve their traditions and exercise their socio-cultural rights. Consequently, these findings present a challenge to all stakeholders—academics, religious leaders, and the state—to foster pastoral approaches and policies that are more dialogical, adaptive, and grounded in the recognition of the diverse religious expressions present in society.

Based on the findings and reflections of this study, there is a clear need for policy initiatives aimed at formal recognition of the diversity of local religious practices within the broader framework of religious life in Indonesia. The government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and related institutions, could develop community-based literacy programmes on religious diversity, engaging customary leaders, church figures, and academics in forums of intercultural and interspiritual dialogue. The Church, as an institution, is also expected to adopt a more open contextual pastoral approach towards local expressions of religiosity—similar to the practices of some contextual churches in Africa and Latin America—by accompanying the faithful without condemning practices that may not fully align with doctrine.

In addition, affirmative policies should be developed to protect the cultural rights of indigenous communities, including the right to their spiritual heritage, as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Establishing centres for local religious studies or *rumah dialog keagamaan* (houses of interfaith dialogue) in regions such as Lamin Telihan could serve as a strategic initiative to bridge the understanding gap between religious institutions and community-based practices. Such efforts would also help to prevent the systemic spiritual marginalisation of indigenous groups.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that belief in *Suli* (reincarnation) and the practice of traditional healing rituals (*Belian*) remain actively sustained within the religious life of the GKII Lamin Telihan congregation of the Dayak Tunjung community, despite their formal adherence to Christianity. The main finding of this research is that the community's religious identity is not shaped solely through the acceptance of institutional doctrine, but rather through a complex negotiation process between new religious teachings and a traditional cosmology deeply rooted in the community's cultural memory and social structure. Beliefs in *Suli* and *Belian* are not merely passive remnants of pre-Christian spirituality; rather, they form an active, contextual, and meaningful hybrid religious configuration embedded in everyday life.

The primary contribution of this study lies in enriching the literature on hybrid religion, *vernacular religion* (locally grounded expressions of faith), and ethical pluralism, particularly within the context of indigenous Christian communities in Indonesia—a field of inquiry that has thus far received relatively little scholarly attention. Conceptually, this research also illustrates how local forms of religiosity can persist and engage in creative dialogue with formal religious teachings through the frameworks of *lived religion*, *ethical pluralism*, and *syncretism*. By presenting a case study from Lamin Telihan, the research deepens our understanding of religious dynamics within indigenous communities—dynamics that cannot be reduced to doctrinal compliance alone, but must also consider spiritual experience, collective narrative, and cultural practice as integral components of community life.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, particularly in terms of geographic scope and data representation. The focus on a single community in Lamin Telihan restricts the generalisability of the findings to other Dayak groups or indigenous communities, which may exhibit different dynamics.

Moreover, although the qualitative approach has allowed for in-depth understanding, this study does not quantitatively assess the extent to which beliefs in *Suli* and *Belian* are distributed across the congregation. Future research could expand the geographical focus, incorporate quantitative methods, and facilitate cross-community comparisons to yield a more comprehensive picture of the persistence of traditional beliefs within indigenous Christian communities in Indonesia.

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