



From Moab to Selalang: Reading Ruth's conversion in the mirror of Iban women's narratives

John Riwu Pekuwali 

Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Bethel Indonesia Jakarta

Correspondence:

joevariu@gmail.com

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.30995/kur.v11i1.1319>

Article History

Submitted: Jan. 15, 2025

Reviewed: March 19, 2025

Accepted: April 30, 2025

Keywords:

contextual hermeneutics;
longhouse;
relational conversion;
Ruth;
women of Dayak Iban

Copyright: ©2024, Authors.

License:



Abstract: This study interprets the narrative of Ruth's conversion in the Old Testament as a hermeneutical model for understanding the faith experience of Dayak Iban women in Selalang, Malaysia, particularly through the story of Ibu Lega. Conversion is not viewed merely as a formal change of religion, but as a complex relational, cultural, and spiritual process. Using a narrative and intertextual hermeneutic approach, this research explores how conversion emerges from experiences of loss, vulnerability, and relational love. Ibu Lega, who chose to remain in the Longhouse after her husband's death to care for her in-laws, created a space for the growth of Christian faith through her steadfastness. In this context, conversion does not reject culture but transforms it into a new form of embodied spirituality lived in daily practices. Like Ruth, Ibu Lega's path to faith did not pass through institutional religion, but through embodied acts of love and sacrifice. This narrative challenges dogmatic colonial mission models and proposes an alternative theology of conversion that is contextual, relational, and intercultural. As a communal spiritual space, the Longhouse becomes a locus for liberating faith transformation that honors local cultural wisdom.

Introduction

Religious and/or faith conversion is inherently complex, involving identity struggles and power struggles within specific cultural contexts, where meaning is shaped. In approaching religious conversion as a multifaceted and non-linear experience, the insights of Marc David Baer are particularly significant. He argues that conversion is not merely a shift in theological belief, but rather a social, political, and cultural process encompassing four key dimensions: acculturation (adjustment to a new culture), adhesion or hybridity (integration of old and new identities), syncretism (blending of religious elements), and transformation (a fundamental change in lifestyle and religious meaning). According to Baer, conversion also carries a spatial dimension, entailing the reconfiguration of sacred space, landscape, and former worship practices into a new religious structure.¹

In the Old Testament, Ruth, a Moabite woman who converted to the faith of Israel, stands as a significant symbol of the integration of faith across ethnic and religious boundaries, even

¹ Lewis R. Rambo, Charles E. Farhadian, and Marc David Baer, "History and Religious Conversion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.001>.

within a context where Israel strongly upheld boundaries against foreign peoples and religious practices.² Ruth did not merely undergo a geographical relocation from Moab to Bethlehem; she also embarked on a spiritual journey that led her to encounter the God of Israel through a relationship marked by love and solidarity with her mother-in-law, Naomi. This narrative carries profound meaning regarding God's inclusivity and the spiritual transformation that emerges from experiences of migration and loss. This transformation cannot be separated from the patriarchal and ethnic context of ancient Israelite society, in which foreigners were often marginalized. However, the narrative of Ruth reveals a space of openness within the religious system and community of Israel toward the presence of "the other," marked by responses of faith, loyalty, and cross-ethnic solidarity. This aligns with the findings of Tirta Susila and Latupeirissa, who argue that the development of Israel's religion reflects a social and historical process that is not linear but shaped by dynamic interactions with external cultures and belief systems.³

In the narrative of Ruth, openness of faith and steadfast love serve as the bridge of conversion that not only welcomes the foreigner but also incorporates her into the very lineage of the Messiah (Mt. 1:5). Thus, the story of Ruth emerges as a counter-hegemonic narrative that elevates the role of the migrant woman as a faith actor and bearer of hope for the community.⁴ Within the customary structure, a woman who has lost her husband is typically expected to leave the Longhouse and return to her own family. However, Ibu Lega made an unconventional decision—she chose to remain with her mother-in-law and care for her faithfully. Through her perseverance, her mother-in-law eventually decided to convert and become a follower of Jesus. This decision reflects steadfast love and devotion akin to Ruth's attitude toward Naomi. A key difference in these narratives lies in the direction and primary agent of conversion. In the story of Ruth, it is Ruth who initiates faith in the God of Israel, binding herself to Naomi's faith and community by declaring, "Your God will be my God." In contrast, in Ibu Lega's story, she is not the one who undergoes conversion, but instead becomes the channel through whom her mother-in-law encounters faith, drawn by her witness of love. Thus, Ruth is the primary subject of faith conversion, while Ibu Lega becomes a mediator of conversion for others through the testimony of her life.

Amid grief and alienation following the loss of her husband, Ibu Lega underwent a process of conversion that was not prompted by formal missionary approaches, but rather emerged from deep inner reflection and the profound relationships she cultivated within the Longhouse. This journey of faith unfolded organically in daily life, amid the shifting values and functions of the Longhouse. A place once centered around ancestral rites, such as *miring*—offerings to ancestral spirits—gradually transformed into an open space for new meanings of hope, love, and the presence of God. Once wholly inhabited by ancestral spirituality, the Longhouse has become a space for inclusive and dynamic interfaith dialogue.

Mother Lega's conversion, like Ruth's, constitutes a subversive act against customary boundaries and collective norms. In Dayak Iban society, women play a crucial role in preserving spiritual and social traditions. When a woman chooses to convert, she is not merely

² Hans-Georg Wüch, "Ruth, a Proselyte Par Excellence - Exegetical and Structural Observations," *Journal for Semitics* 24, no. 1 (2017): 36–64, <https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/3438>.

³ Tirta Susila and Latupeirissa Risvan, "Reconstructing the Formation of Israel's Religion in the Context of Old Testament Biblical Text," *Khazanah Theologia* 4, no. 2 (2022): 117–34, <https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v4i2.17024>.

⁴ Mulyawan Karim, *Di Rumah Panjang: Pergulatan Hidup Dan Cinta Orang Dayak Iban* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2021).

leaving behind her former religion, but also relinquishing a part of her collective identity.⁵ This requires existential and spiritual courage to respond to a new call of faith amid social marginality. Such a journey of conversion also challenges dominant narratives of religion as a static, inherited tradition. In both Ruth's story and Mother Lega's life, religion is not experienced as a rigid system of dogma, but rather as an active response to lived experiences and social relationships, imbued with love, faithfulness, and hope. These narratives demonstrate that women become authentic and contextual agents of faith transformation through relationship and sacrifice.

In the Southeast Asian context, where indigenous communities such as the Dayak Iban stand at the crossroads of tradition, global religions, and social change, the study of women's religious conversion becomes highly relevant. Conversion is not merely a formal shift from one religion to another, but a complex process encompassing cultural, spiritual, and identity dimensions. Experiences like that of Mother Lega open new theological spaces for reflection on mission, inclusion, and the role of women in the dynamics of faith. The central thesis of this study is that the narrative of Ruth's conversion in the Old Testament can serve as a contextual hermeneutical model for interpreting the faith experiences of Dayak Iban women in Selalang. By exploring Mother Lega's story through the theological lens of Ruth, this research proposes that true conversion is a spiritual journey rooted in love, courage, and cross-cultural relationships, revealing that God works through migrant women on the margins of the world.

This study employs a qualitative narrative-hermeneutical approach, utilizing a contextual case study method, to reinterpret the conversion narrative of Ruth in the Old Testament through the lens of the lived experience of a Dayak Iban woman named Mother Lega in Selalang, Malaysia. Data are collected through a literature review of biblical texts and ethnographic documents, as well as a narrative analysis of Mother Lega's life story, as recounted in available primary and secondary sources. The study employs an intertextual hermeneutic approach, which facilitates a critical encounter between Scripture and the lived realities of indigenous women, to uncover the theological meanings and identity transformations emerging from the experience of conversion within a social space shaped by patriarchal and cultural values.

Ruth and the Relational Model of Conversion in a Patriarchal Context

Religious and/or faith conversion in the Old Testament tradition is not systematically structured, as it is in modern church traditions. It is not accompanied by formal sacramental rites or explicit doctrinal confessions, but is manifested through transformative narratives that engage issues of identity, ethnicity, and social relationships.⁶ The Book of Ruth offers a comprehensive example of such a narrative. As a Moabite woman, Ruth comes from a nation explicitly forbidden from entering the assembly of Israel (Dt. 23:3).⁷ However, her story

⁵ UNDP, "Masyarakat Adat Rumah Panjang Dayak Iban Sungai Utik," 2021.

⁶ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 35.

⁷ Referring to Ruth as a "Moabite woman" emphasizes her origin outside of Israel. Moab was descended from Lot, a lineage often viewed negatively by the Israelites due to its origins (Gen. 19:37) and association with idolatry—primarily through the incident at Baal-Peor, where Moabite women enticed Israelite men into sexual immorality and the worship of foreign gods (Num. 25:1-3). They were associated with cultural customs that permitted women to take active roles in religious practices and fertility rituals, as reflected in the broader religious landscape of the ancient southern Levant. See: K. L. Noll, *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction* (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 136–38. However, Ruth stands out as a striking exception—a Moabite woman who demonstrates loyalty, courage, and integrity, ultimately being recognized as the ancestor of David

becomes one of the most significant narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning God's openness to the outsider. Her decision to follow her mother-in-law Naomi and her famous declaration, "Your God will be my God, and your people my people" (Ruth 1:16), represents a profession of faith that is not merely personal, but also social, political, and theological.

In Hebrew, Ruth's declarative statement to Naomi employs a grammatical structure that powerfully underscores her determination to fully bind herself to the Israelite community and their God. The phrase *elohayikh elohay* (אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֱלֹהַי), meaning "your God is my God," reflects a total adoption of the faith and covenantal relationship of the people of Israel. This represents a form of "relational conversion" that goes beyond internal belief, manifesting in full participation in the life of God's people. In the *Targum* of Ruth, she is praised as a model of a non-Israelite who accepts the Torah, keeps the law, and is deemed worthy of belonging to the community of salvation.⁸ According to Lewis Rambo, such a conversion is a prolonged process involving crisis stages, meaning-seeking, social interaction, and eventual integration into a new community.⁹

The patriarchal and ethnocentric social context of ancient Israel renders Ruth's conversion a profoundly subversive event. The social structure of the time upheld male lineage, masculine leadership, and ethnic exclusivity as the foundation of community membership. Foreign women—especially from Moab—were perceived as threats to ritual purity and cultural integrity. However, the narrative of Ruth deliberately overturns this structure. Ruth is positioned as the central figure who takes initiative, demonstrates unwavering loyalty, and ultimately receives a place of honor in the genealogy of the Messiah (Mt. 1:5).¹⁰ Within this context, the story of Ruth serves as a narrative critique of the patriarchal system that restricts the spiritual and social space of foreign women, while affirming God's inclusivity that transcends the boundaries of bloodline and nation.

Ruth's conversion was not prompted by institutional religious intervention or formal theological mission. However, it emerged through a deeply human encounter marked by *hesed*—steadfast love, covenantal loyalty, and solidarity that transcends social obligation. Her relationship with Naomi became the space where faith in the God of Israel was nurtured and strengthened.¹¹ This shapes a theological paradigm in which conversion is not merely a theological or legal transition, but a faith-filled response to experiences of relationship, suffering, and love. In a relational hermeneutic reading, Ruth's conversion is an existential confession and a prophetic act that transcends the legalistic formalities of religion.¹²

In Baer's study on conversion, it is described not as a singular moment but as a multifaceted process involving acculturation, adhesion, syncretism, and transformation.¹³ This

(Ruth 4:17) and becoming a symbol of inclusion within God's redemptive plan. See: Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 21–24. This tension becomes even more apparent in the prohibition of intermarriage during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, driven by fears of religious deviation (Neh. 13:23–27), highlighting the ambivalent perception of Moabite women—as both spiritual threats and potential bearers of blessing.

⁸ Jill L Hurley, "Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-Relational Ontological (Re)Turn to Relations," *OKH Journal: Anthropological Ethnography and Analysis Through the Eyes of Christian Faith* 2, no. 2 (2018): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.18251/okh.v2i2.27>.

⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*.

¹⁰ William D Barrick, "Living a New Life: Old Testament Teaching About Conversion," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2000): 30.

¹¹ Hurley, "Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-Relational Ontological (Re)Turn to Relations."

¹² Rambo, Farhadian, and Baer, "History and Religious Conversion."

¹³ Rambo, Farhadian, and Baer.

process is evident in the life of Mother Lega, where experiences of loss, social marginalization, and relational attachment became the entry points for a reflective and gradual conversion journey. Like Ruth, Mother Lega did not undergo conversion through indoctrination, but through the presence of love and openness within the new community she chose. Her conversion demonstrates that the shift in faith is often the result of a long life narrative—one marked by wounds, courage, and hope.

On the other hand, Jewish tradition portrays the *giyur*—conversion to Judaism—as a complex and serious legal and spiritual undertaking. This process typically includes full acceptance of the Torah, a willingness to live according to its commandments, and active participation in the life of the Jewish community. It also involves rites such as circumcision for men, study of Jewish laws, and immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath), all of which emphasize the legalistic and ritual dimensions of entering the covenant community. However, the Book of Ruth narrative deliberately sets these formal ritual elements aside. Instead, it highlights the deepest essence of true conversion: wholehearted loyalty to the God of Israel and solidarity with His people.

Ruth, the Moabite woman, did not undergo the stages of *giyur* as understood in post-exilic rabbinic literature. However, she was fully recognized and accepted within the Israelite community through concrete actions that embodied loyalty, love, and commitment to Naomi and God (Ruth 1:16-17). This was not merely an intellectual affirmation or legal fulfillment, but a form of conversion rooted in relationship and ethics—a willingness to relinquish the past and construct a new identity within the context of faith and social solidarity. *Midrash Ruth Rabbah* 1:16 subtly underscores this dimension by elevating Ruth's words as an example of true repentance that extends beyond formal legal actions—an expression of the heart binding itself to God and His people in genuine love and commitment. Thus, the story of Ruth may be read as a gentle critique of rigid and legalistic models of conversion and as a call for the formation of conversion paradigms that emphasize relational integrity and ethical transformation. This narrative reveals that what God values is not the completeness of legal procedures, but the sincerity of heart, steadfastness of faith, and authentic solidarity with the people of God.¹⁴

In postcolonial and feminist readings, the story of Ruth can be interpreted as a form of spiritual resistance against systems of domination that oppress women and foreigners. Ruth is not a passive object in a salvation narrative, but an active subject who consciously chooses faith and ethically shapes the community's future. She carries a dual role: as a foreign woman and a poor widow, a bearer of hope and an inheritor of God's covenant.¹⁵ This parallels the narrative of Mother Lega, which illustrates how a woman from an indigenous community can transform a marginal situation into a profound and liberating testimony of faith.

A relational hermeneutic of the Book of Ruth enables us to reread the biblical text through the lens of the lived experiences of indigenous women. Conversion is no longer understood merely as a shift in belief, but as a spiritual engagement born out of love, loss, labor, and social attachment. When the Christian community embraces this understanding of conversion, mission is no longer about quantitatively winning souls. However, it becomes an encounter of love that upholds human dignity and nurtures faith within the realities of everyday life. In

¹⁴ Maurice M. Mizrahi, "Ruth's Conversion: Midrash Rabbah on Chapter 1 of the Book of Ruth," 2010.

¹⁵ Ruth Preser, "Things I Learned from the Book of Ruth," in *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, ed. Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Manuele Gragnolati (Turia + Kant, 2020), 47–65, https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11_03.

this way, the narrative of Ruth shapes a model of conversion that is relational, inclusive, and rooted in cross-boundary solidarity. It challenges patriarchal systems and ethnic exclusivism by presenting a foreign woman as a legitimate heir of the divine covenant. Within the context of Southeast Asian indigenous communities, such as the Iban, this model is deeply relevant, affirming that conversion is not a form of religious domination over culture. However, a loving dialogue that opens space for faith to grow, honors local traditions, and reveals God's active presence in the life stories of women at the margins of the world.

The Reality of Conversion in the Longhouse: Identity, Relationships, and the Resilience of Faith

The Longhouse (*Rumah Panjang*) in Dayak Iban Society¹⁶ It is not merely a communal dwelling, but a cultural and spiritual institution that embodies inter-family relationships, belief systems, and mechanisms for transmitting customary values. As noted by Sugiyanto, the Longhouse serves as the center of social life and religious rites for the Iban community. Tradition, education, and spirituality are interwoven in this sacred space.¹⁷ Within this space, the boundary between the sacred and the profane becomes blurred. The Longhouse functions as a “social chamber” that shapes and constrains one’s identity, particularly for women who have lost structural status, such as widows. This context is crucial when discussing religious conversion, as faith transition does not occur in a vacuum, but within a complex web of norms, relationships, and symbols.

Mother Lega’s story serves as a concrete example of the dynamics of faith conversion within the customary Longhouse setting. Upon the death of her husband, custom dictated that a widow must leave the Longhouse, as she had lost the “head of household,” the legal and spiritual basis for her presence in the community. However, Mother Lega made a countercultural decision: to remain and care for her mother-in-law. This choice carried social consequences and spiritual significance, as her loyalty became the fertile ground for the growth of faith and openness to the Gospel. In this action, conversion did not occur through aggressive missionary efforts, but was born from lived experience, through relationship, sacrifice, and love that transcended customary boundaries. Lega affirmed that many people had asked her here—there is a particular tradition, but she could not say who it was from. If a woman divorces her husband, she must leave that house... But from this mother’s family, they were told: ‘Do not separate her from them.’

In the longhouse culture of the Dayak Iban, customary law dictates that a woman who has lost her husband, whether through divorce or death, must leave the residential community, as she is considered to have lost the legal and spiritual basis to remain in her husband’s family chamber. However, in the story of Mother Lega, we encounter an exception that does not stem from a formal change in customary law, but from the power of relationships that transcend tradition. She was not expelled; her in-laws encouraged her to stay, saying, “If possible, do not leave this place. We consider you as our daughter.” This statement is not

¹⁶ The Dayak Iban community primarily resides on the island of Borneo (Kalimantan). However, due to the London Convention of 1891, signed by Great Britain and the Netherlands on June 20, 1891, which established the boundary between Indonesia and Malaysia, the Dayak Iban community is now divided between West Kalimantan (Indonesia) and Kuching (Malaysia).

¹⁷ Sugiyanto, “Kehidupan Sosial Budaya Etnis Dayak Iban Di Badau,” *Sosio Informa* 16, no. 2 (2011): 133–44, <https://doi.org/10.33007/inf.v16i2.960>.

merely an expression of affection, but a radical form of acceptance that transcends the structural boundaries of customary society.

Although Mother Lega's separation from her husband was not due to divorce but to his death, the customary expectation for her departure still applied. However, Mother Lega embodied a different perspective: her unwavering commitment to care for her mother-in-law gave birth to a faith journey. Her conversion was not the result of formal religious instruction or institutional persuasion, but emerged through relational fidelity that transcended custom and revealed the transformative power of love. In this context, conversion becomes a sacred act born of presence, care, and covenantal solidarity.

Here, the Longhouse reveals another face, not merely as a customary institution governed by strict regulations, but as a space of love capable of embracing vulnerability, wounds, and loyalty. When the mother-in-law said, "She is not a daughter-in-law to me, but a daughter," familial identity was no longer shaped by blood or legal status, but by relationships of love lived out concretely in daily life. In this space, faith does not appear as a system of separation, but as a unifying force through renewed relationships. In this context, the Longhouse symbolizes that faith identity can be born from intimacy, not merely customary legitimacy.

Mother Lega embodies existential courage, in which relationships and identity are shaped not by structural norms, but by a response to suffering and love. Within the longhouse context, deeply embedded in custom and tradition, her decision to remain and care for her mother-in-law after her husband's death signifies a loyalty that transcends customary expectations. While tradition dictates that a widow must leave the Longhouse, the testimony of her in-laws reveals a contrasting reality: "If possible, do not leave this place. We consider you as our daughter." Mother Lega's fidelity, which surpasses structural boundaries, opens a new spiritual space, becoming a reflection of love that heals.

This aligns with the perspectives of Lewis Rambo and others, who assert that conversion results from crisis, meaning-seeking, and relational engagement. Faith does not grow out of domination, but from vulnerability that is faithfully embraced.¹⁸ Mother Lega stated, "I only call on God to sustain me... I do not know who else to turn to." This confession reveals that the faith she embraced was not born out of institutional coercion, but from steadfastness in suffering and a simple yet profound hope. The Longhouse, which once represented the boundaries of custom, has become a field of love that nurtures new faith.

The Longhouse offers a symbolic and practical space for exploring the meaning of living faith. Amid the tension between tradition and change, the Longhouse continues to preserve solidarity while becoming a place for the dialectic of values.¹⁹ A study by Yani Saloh on the life of the Sungai Utik community reveals that the Longhouse is not a closed space, but a living space that is continuously redefined.²⁰ When women like Maryetha Samay and Mother Igoh lead communities in crafts, education, and ecotourism, they also create a new interpretation of the role of women in the Longhouse.²¹ In this context, conversion is not a betrayal of tradition but a spiritual expansion of noble values such as environmental stewardship, solidarity, and perseverance.

Dayak Iban women occupy an ambiguous position within the customary system: they are respected as pillars of the community, yet often restricted in their decision-making mobility.

¹⁸ Rambo, Farhadian, and Baer, "History and Religious Conversion."

¹⁹ Sugiyanto, "Kehidupan Sosial Budaya Etnis Dayak Iban Di Badau."

²⁰ UNDP, "Masyarakat Adat Rumah Panjang Dayak Iban Sungai Utik."

²¹ Yani Saloh, "Merasakan Geliat Iban di Rumah Panjang Sungai Utik," Mongabay, 2017, <https://www.mongabay.co.id/2017/12/13/foto-merasakan-geliat-iban-di-rumah-panjang-sungai-utik/>.

Religious conversion becomes a new articulatory space to redefine their agency.²² Sulastris's research shows that Iban women who convert to Christianity do not outright reject tradition, but reinterpret traditional values through the framework of their new faith. This is evident in the use of *pua kumbu*, a conventional Iban textile, as a symbol of worship within the Christian community, or in the incorporation of the Iban language into the liturgy of the Longhouse.²³

Interestingly, the Longhouse in Sungai Utik, which has been designated a national cultural heritage site, has evolved into a space for ecospirituality that integrates tradition, education, and faith-based ecotourism with local wisdom. Women are empowered to manage the *rumah betang* as an ecotourism destination, engage in weaving, teach, and even manage the community's finances. This transformation demonstrates that spirituality is no longer confined to customary rites or church worship, but is lived daily: harvesting vegetables from the forest, preserving the call of the *murai* bird, and welcoming guests with *tuak* as a symbol of sacred hospitality.

In the structure of the Longhouse, religious conversion, particularly as experienced by women, contains an unavoidable cultural and spiritual dimension. It raises questions about who has the right to stay, who is accepted, and who is considered "faithful." In Mother Lega's experience, faith is not a mere transition from one system to another, but an openness to love that manifests within relationships. Relationships with her mother-in-law, the community, and God. In a structure that excludes, faith grows as a form of gentle resistance that heals and nurtures. This phenomenon demonstrates that conversion in the Longhouse is not merely a relationship with a new religion, but also a form of identity formation. In the Old Testament, Ruth chose to remain with Naomi and the God of Israel, not because of doctrine but because of their relationship. Similarly, Mother Lega found a new spiritual space to know God in her solitude as a widow in the Longhouse. She did not attend a church, but the church was present within her, through her hands serving food to her mother-in-law and her steps as she walked through the ancestral forest every morning.

This kind of conversion, born from the body of indigenous women and domestic spaces, shows that faith is not shaped from above, by institutions or dogma, but from below, from the land, water, relationships, and wounds. The conversion of Mother Lega and other Iban women in the longhouse demonstrates that God works through the gentleness of culture, the silence of tradition, and the courage that allows love to endure.

Hermeneutics of Conversion and Theological Implications in the Southeast Asian Context

In the Southeast Asian context, where diverse cultural, spiritual, and religious landscapes intersect, the hermeneutics of conversion takes on a unique significance. Conversion in this setting is not merely a theological shift, but a profound engagement with identity, culture, and community. It becomes a transformative process that reinterprets faith within the complex realities of life. The hermeneutic lens through which conversion is understood in Southeast Asia is shaped by relational, contextual, and spiritual dimensions deeply tied to indigenous practices and beliefs. In this context, conversion is not merely a change in religious affiliation but a redefinition of self within the community and the broader socio-cultural and spiritual environment. It raises critical theological questions: What does it mean to be a "Christian" in a

²² Kumpiady Widen, "Orang Dayak Dan Kebudayaannya," *Journal Ilmu Sosial, Politik Dan Pemerintahan* 12, no. 2 (2023): 207–18, <https://doi.org/10.37304/jispar.v12i2.9834>.

²³ Saptiana Sulastris, "Unsur-Unsur Budaya Dayak Iban Dalam Novel Keling Kumang Karya Ray Masri Sareb Putra," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa* 6, no. 1 (2017): 37–50.

context where indigenous cultures and ancestral beliefs have traditionally shaped religious identity? How does conversion impact communal solidarity, especially in societies where spirituality and tradition are closely intertwined?

The narrative of Ruth and the story of conversion in the context of the Dayak Iban Longhouse present two culturally and spiritually distinct horizons, geographically and historically separated, yet both resonate with a profound experience of faith. In the Book of Ruth, the declaration "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16) marks a pivotal turning point in both relational and existential terms. A similar dynamic is found in the conversion of the Iban Christian community in the Longhouse Rungga, Selalang, Malaysia, where acceptance of the Christian faith did not occur in theological isolation, but through lived encounters, solidarity, and a collective shift in the meaning of community.

Rumah Panjang serves not merely as a place of residence, but as a locus for the formation of authentic religious and social identity. Just as Ruth chose to join the Israelite community fully, the Iban Christian community also does not merely embrace a new religion. However, it integrates it into the customary structure, ecological solidarity, and collective order. In the Longhouse, conversion does not mean abandoning culture, but revising the meaning of spirituality in the light of a new faith. This is where the hermeneutical encounter between Ruth and the Longhouse takes place: both form a relational model of conversion that transcends doctrinal boundaries. In the light of contextual hermeneutics, the experiences of Ruth and women like Mother Lega in the Iban community reveal that conversion is not a doctrine that alienates, but a praxis that affirms the courage to choose a new life amidst uncertainty. They articulate faith not in systematic theological language, but in everyday relational actions filled with love, courage, and perseverance. Their conversion echoes an 'embodied faith' that rejects the dichotomy between tradition and religion.

Rumah Panjang, a social institution of the Dayak Iban, represents a space where tradition, faith, and collective identity meet. This structure is not dismantled during the conversion to Christianity, but instead becomes a field for articulating a new faith. Liturgy, prayer practices, and Christian symbols are transformed and negotiated within communal spaces, without erasing the memory of tradition. This process reflects what Arjun Appadurai calls "ethnoscape"—a dynamic space where identity is continually negotiated in cultural and religious terms.²⁴

The bidirectional hermeneutic approach used in the reading of the narratives of the Longhouse and Ruth opens up space for what Paul Ricoeur calls "hermeneutics of faith"—an interpretation that begins with the belief that both sacred texts and indigenous narratives contain existential truth.²⁵ Therefore, the faith experience of indigenous women like Mother Lega is not a 'shift of faith', but a 'growth of faith' that is contextual and transformative. The dynamics of conversion in the Southeast Asian context, particularly among the Iban in Malaysia and the Dayak in West Kalimantan, reveal that the spirituality of indigenous women evolves in the tension between tradition and institutional religion. In many cases, such as with Mother Lega and the Sungai Utik community, the decision to follow Christ did not stem from evangelical pressure, but rather from a deep, relational engagement and an experience of

²⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33–36.

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

suffering. Such a conversion is 'inclusive and woven with experience', rather than hegemonic or traumatic.

Experiences of conversion like this remind us of the Hebrew concept of *shub* (שוב), which means "to return"—a spiritual process rooted in repentance, but also the direction of a new life. The conversion of indigenous women is not a 'betrayal of culture,' but a *shub* towards a more meaningful and just life, especially for communities that have been marginalized and oppressed by both colonial and patriarchal systems. In Southeast Asian hermeneutics, examining how women's bodies become sites of conversion is crucial. Both Ruth and Mother Lega not only experience a transformation of faith but also must confront patriarchal systems and ethnic exclusion. Their faith decisions are radical because they challenge dominant social narratives. Conversion in this context is a spiritual courage, embodied and liberating, not merely a change of denomination.

The theology of conversion in this context must move away from a dogmatic approach and align more with an intersubjective perspective. I propose the concept of the "interruption of grace"—grace that enters as a disruption to oppressive social systems. The conversions of Ruth and Mother Lega serve as creative disruptions to the old order, giving birth to a new community that is more equitable and compassionate. The Longhouse community does not view conversion as a threat to cultural integrity, but as an opportunity to transform identity. By adopting values of love, cooperation, and justice from Christianity, they reaffirm the meaning of tradition as a living spirituality. Thus, conversion in the Longhouse becomes a "collective repentance" process toward relational ecology and social justice.

This process also critiques colonial missions that tend to impose institutional conversion, separating faith from the context of life. The narratives of Ruth and the Longhouse demonstrate that true conversion cannot be limited by rituals and dogmatic structures, but must arise from real encounters and sacrifices. Conversion becomes a praxis of humility and solidarity, not an expansion of power. From this, we can conclude that the hermeneutics of conversion in the Southeast Asian context must be contextual, relational, and open to the experiences of the body, history, and nature. The theology of conversion that develops from the narrative of Ruth and the experiences of indigenous Iban women points the way toward an intercultural, inclusive, and prophetic spirituality. Conversion is not the erasure of identity, but the affirmation of a new life full of meaning.

Conclusion

The conversion experiences of Ruth in the Bible and Mother Lega in the Longhouse of Selalang demonstrate that faith is not merely a shift in doctrine or theological systems, but a profound and contextual relational journey. In the context of a patriarchal society and collective tradition, a woman's decision to persevere, care, and love becomes a subversive space where faith grows authentically. Just as Ruth remained faithful to Naomi, Mother Lega shows that loyalty to relationships can be a bridge to encounter God.

Conversion in the Dayak Iban Longhouse context does not negate culture, but transforms it from within. The Longhouse becomes not only a space where tradition is practiced, but also a vessel for a new spirituality that upholds the values of love, loyalty, and collective work. This reflects a form of conversion rooted in women's bodies and daily life, making them key agents in the renewal of faith and community. Thus, conversion is not a severance of identity, but a process of grounding faith amidst tradition. The relational, inclusive, and embodied hermeneutic conversion model is crucial for Southeast Asia's pluralistic context, where tensions exist between tradition and institutional religion. Mother Lega's conversion is a

manifestation of *shub*—repentance and a new direction in life—lived fully in silence, pain, and hope. This conversion rejects domination and offers a liberating and nurturing spirituality, allowing God to work through the body, the land, and love.

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Barrick, William D. "Living a New Life: Old Testament Teaching About Conversion." *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (2000): 19–38.
- Hurley, Jill L. "Understanding Christian Conversion as a Post-Relational Ontological (Re)Turn to Relations." *OKH Journal: Anthropological Ethnography and Analysis Through the Eyes of Christian Faith* 2, no. 2 (2018): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.18251/okh.v2i2.27>.
- Karim, Mulyawan. *Di Rumah Panjang: Pergulatan Hidup Dan Cinta Orang Dayak Iban*. Jakarta: Kompas, 2021.
- Mizrahi, Maurice M. "Ruth's Conversion: Midrash Rabbah on Chapter 1 of the Book of Ruth," 2010.
- Noll, K. L. *Canaan and Israel in Antiquity: An Introduction*. London: T&T Clark International, 2012.
- Preser, Ruth. "Things I Learned from the Book of Ruth." In *De/Constituting Wholes: Towards Partiality Without Parts*, edited by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Manuele Gragnolati, 47–65. Turia + Kant, 2020. https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-11_03.
- Rambo, Lewis R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Rambo, Lewis R., Charles E. Farhadian, and Marc David Baer. "History and Religious Conversion." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, 1–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195338522.013.001>.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, and Interpretation*. Edited by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *Ruth: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.
- Saloh, Yani. "Merasakan Geliat Iban Di Rumah Panjang Sungai Utik." Mongabay, 2017. <https://www.mongabay.co.id/2017/12/13/foto-merasakan-geliat-iban-di-rumah-panjang-sungai-utik/>.
- Sugiyanto, Sugiyanto. "Kehidupan Sosial Budaya Etnis Dayak Iban Di Badau." *Sosio Informa* 16, no. 2 (2011): 133–44. <https://doi.org/10.33007/inf.v16i2.960>.
- Sulastri, Saptiana. "Unsur-Unsur Budaya Dayak Iban Dalam Novel Keling Kumang Karya Ray Masri Sareb Putra." *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa* 6, no. 1 (2017): 37–50.
- Susila, Tirta, and Latupeirissa Risvan. "Reconstructing the Formation of Israel's Religion in the Context of Old Testament Biblical Text." *Khazanah Theologia* 4, no. 2 (2022): 117–34. <https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v4i2.17024>.
- UNDP. "Masyarakat Adat Rumah Panjang Dayak Iban Sungai Utik," 2021.
- Widen, Kumpiady. "Orang Dayak Dan Kebudayaanannya." *Journal Ilmu Sosial, Politik Dan Pemerintahan* 12, no. 2 (2023): 207–18. <https://doi.org/10.37304/jispar.v12i2.9834>.
- Wünc, Hans-Georg. "Ruth, a Proselyte Par Excellence - Exegetical and Structural Observations." *Journal for Semitics* 24, no. 1 (2017): 36–64. <https://doi.org/10.25159/1013-8471/3438>.