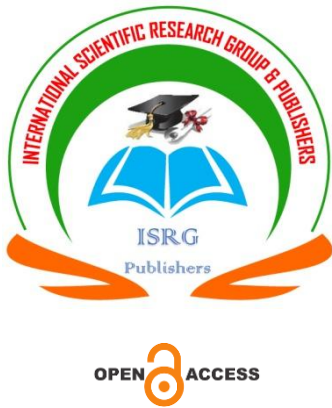


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Constructing A Contextual Theology of Death: An Existential Hermeneutical Dialogue Between Psalm 90 and Rambu Solo' in Toraja

Kristanto^{1*}, Yonathan Mangolo²

^{1, 2} Fakultas Teologi Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja

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***Corresponding author:** Kristanto

Abstract

This study examines the meaning of death through an existential hermeneutical dialogue between Psalm 90 and the Torajan funeral tradition of Rambu Solo'. While Psalm 90 presents death within the theological horizon of God's eternity, human finitude, and the pursuit of wisdom, Rambu Solo' interprets death as a communal and cultural reality that strengthens solidarity, preserves collective memory, and affirms social identity. Employing a qualitative approach, this study integrates Martin Heidegger's existential hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics to interpret the biblical text and engage it critically with the lived experience of Torajan culture. Data were obtained through biblical and literature analysis, supported by contextual observations and interviews to enrich the hermeneutical dialogue. The findings reveal significant points of convergence between Psalm 90 and Rambu Solo', particularly in their shared recognition of human mortality, the importance of communal reflection, and the ethical value of solidarity. At the same time, the dialogue exposes theological tensions concerning the source of hope, the role of ancestral traditions, and the potential for syncretistic interpretations. Based on these findings, the study proposes a contextual theology of death in which Scripture remains the primary theological norm while local culture provides the existential context for embodying biblical truth. The study further argues that existential hermeneutics offers an effective framework for fostering constructive dialogue between Christian theology and local culture, contributing to both contextual theological scholarship and culturally sensitive Christian funeral ministry in Toraja.

Keywords: Existential Hermeneutics; Psalm 90; Rambu Solo'; Theology of Death; Contextual Theology.

INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the most universal realities of human existence. Throughout history, it has confronted humanity with profound existential questions concerning the meaning of life, human finitude, and the hope that transcends mortality. Every civilization,

religion, and culture has sought to interpret death through its own worldview, producing theological, philosophical, and cultural perspectives that shape the way people understand life and respond to death. Consequently, death should not be regarded merely as the

biological termination of life but also as an existential event that continually invites human beings to reflect on the purpose and significance of their existence (Kokosalakis, 2020).

Within the Torajan cultural tradition, death occupies a central place in both religious belief and communal life. The funeral ceremony known as *Rambu Solo'* represents far more than a customary burial ritual. It functions as a sacred cultural institution through which communal solidarity is strengthened, kinship relationships are reaffirmed, and respect is expressed toward those who have passed away (Sapril, 2022; Pasasa, 2014). Through its rich symbolism and ritual practices, *Rambu Solo'* presents death as a transition rather than an absolute end, emphasizing the continuity of relationships between the living and the deceased within the cosmological worldview of the Toraja people (Anggraeni & Putri, 2020; Novita et al., 2024).

At the same time, Christianity offers a distinctive theological understanding of death. Rather than interpreting death solely as a natural phenomenon, Christian theology views it within the broader framework of God's redemptive work accomplished through Jesus Christ. Death is understood both as the consequence of human sin and as the gateway to eternal life through the hope of resurrection (Hadiwijono, 2015). Since the majority of the Torajan people today identify themselves as Christians while continuing to preserve many cultural elements of *Rambu Solo'*, these two interpretive horizons coexist in everyday religious life. This encounter creates both opportunities and tensions in the relationship between Christian faith and traditional cultural practices (Kristanto et al., 2024).

Among the biblical texts that provide profound theological reflection on mortality, Psalm 90 occupies a distinctive position. Traditionally attributed to Moses, this psalm presents a compelling meditation on the contrast between God's eternity and human transience. It portrays human life as brief and fragile while directing believers toward divine wisdom through the well-known petition, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). Rather than encouraging despair, Psalm 90 invites readers to acknowledge human finitude as the foundation for living wisely before God (Goldingay, 2008). Such an existential perspective opens a meaningful dialogue with cultures that possess rich traditions concerning death and remembrance.

Previous studies have examined *Rambu Solo'* from anthropological, sociological, ethical, and pastoral perspectives (Rettang & Syukur, 2023). Other scholars have explored the relationship between existential philosophy and the Torajan funeral tradition through Heidegger's concept of *Sein-zum-Tode* (Rongrean, 2024). Nevertheless, these studies generally treat the biblical text and the Torajan funeral tradition as separate objects of investigation. Likewise, biblical studies on Psalm 90 primarily focus on its theological and literary dimensions without engaging in dialogue with Torajan cultural narratives (Goldingay, 2008). Consequently, research that intentionally brings Psalm 90 into conversation with *Rambu Solo'* through the combined perspectives of Martin Heidegger's existential hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics remains limited (Ricoeur, 1976).

This study seeks to address that gap by reading Psalm 90 through an existential hermeneutical perspective while engaging in dialogue with the tradition of *Rambu Solo'* in Toraja. Rather than positioning biblical faith and local culture as mutually opposing realities, this research explores their points of convergence and

divergence in order to formulate a contextual theological understanding of death that remains faithful to the biblical witness while appreciating the cultural wisdom embedded within the Torajan funeral tradition. Accordingly, this study contributes to the development of contextual theology by offering an existential hermeneutical model for interpreting death and the meaning of life, together with practical implications for Christian funeral ministry in the Torajan context.

IDENTIFY, RESEARCH AND COLLECT IDEA

1. Existential Understanding of Death

Death has long occupied a central position in existential philosophy because it confronts human beings with the fundamental question of the meaning of existence. Rather than understanding death merely as a biological event, existential thinkers regard it as an essential dimension of human existence that shapes the way individuals understand themselves, their freedom, and the significance of their lives. The awareness of mortality does not necessarily lead to despair; instead, it calls individuals to live more consciously, responsibly, and authentically (Tillich, 2008; Ispas, 2025).

Among existential philosophers, Martin Heidegger offers one of the most influential interpretations of death through his concept of *Sein zum Tode* (being toward death). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that death is not simply an event that occurs at the end of life but an ever-present possibility that accompanies human existence. Human beings (*Dasein*) are unique because they are aware of their own mortality, and this awareness distinguishes authentic existence from an inauthentic mode of living. Authenticity emerges when individuals recognize the certainty of death and allow that awareness to shape their decisions, priorities, and responsibilities throughout life (Heidegger, 1962).

Within Heidegger's existential framework, death should not be interpreted as a source of fear that paralyzes human existence. Instead, the anticipation of death liberates individuals from superficial concerns and directs them toward what is genuinely meaningful. By recognizing the finitude of life, people become capable of living more intentionally and responsibly. Consequently, mortality becomes not merely the end of existence but an existential horizon through which the meaning of life is disclosed (Heidegger, 1962; Rongrean, 2024).

Existential theology further develops these philosophical insights within the context of Christian faith. Paul Tillich emphasizes that faith is not merely intellectual assent to religious doctrines but the courage to confront anxiety, finitude, and death while remaining open to God's ultimate concern. In this perspective, existential anxiety is not the opposite of faith but one of the conditions through which authentic faith is experienced. Christian hope therefore does not deny the reality of death but transforms its meaning through trust in God (Tillich, 2008; Tillich, 1976).

A similar perspective is found in Rudolf Bultmann's existential interpretation of the New Testament. Through the concept of demythologization, Bultmann argues that biblical proclamation should not be understood merely as historical information but as an existential call demanding a personal response of faith. The biblical message continually addresses contemporary readers by inviting them to make authentic decisions before God. Accordingly,

biblical texts concerning death should be interpreted not only as descriptions of future realities but also as existential invitations to live responsibly in the present (Bourke, 1957).

The existential understanding of death is further enriched by Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics. Ricoeur maintains that once a text is written, it acquires a degree of autonomy from its author and becomes open to new interpretations within different historical and cultural contexts. Through the process of distancing, the text is no longer confined to the author's original intention but continually discloses new possibilities of meaning as it encounters new readers and contexts (Ricoeur, 1976; Kearney, 2017). Consequently, biblical texts may continue to speak meaningfully across cultures without losing their theological authority. Ricoeur also emphasizes the importance of narrative in shaping human understanding of time and existence. Human beings interpret their lives through stories that connect past experiences, present realities, and future expectations. This narrative dimension provides an appropriate hermeneutical framework for reading Psalm 90 alongside the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'*. Both present distinctive narratives concerning mortality and the meaning of life, thereby creating the possibility of a constructive dialogue between biblical theology and local cultural experience (Ricoeur, 2014).

Taken together, Heidegger's existential hermeneutics and Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics provide the principal interpretive framework for this study. Heidegger offers an existential understanding of mortality through the concept of being-toward-death, while Ricoeur provides a dialogical approach that enables biblical texts and cultural traditions to encounter one another within new horizons of meaning. These complementary perspectives establish the conceptual foundation for interpreting Psalm 90 in dialogue with the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'*, with the aim of developing a contextual theological understanding of death and the meaning of life.

2. Death in Psalm 90

Psalm 90 occupies a distinctive place within the Psalter as one of the most profound biblical reflections on the reality of human mortality. Traditionally attributed to Moses, the psalm contrasts the eternal nature of God with the transitory existence of humanity. While God is portrayed as everlasting, existing "from everlasting to everlasting," human beings are described as creatures who inevitably return to dust, emphasizing the fragile and temporary character of earthly life (Goldingay, 2008).

The psalm presents death not merely as the biological conclusion of human existence but as an existential reminder of humanity's finitude before God. Human life is portrayed as brief, comparable to grass that flourishes in the morning but withers by evening (Ps. 90:5–6). This imagery highlights the uncertainty and brevity of life while inviting readers to acknowledge the limitations inherent in the human condition. As Mays (2011) observes, these metaphors are intended not merely to emphasize human fragility but to direct readers toward a theological awareness of their dependence upon God. Rather than encouraging pessimism, the psalm calls believers to recognize that life derives its true significance only when understood in relation to God's eternal sovereignty (Goldingay, 2008).

A central theological theme in Psalm 90 is the relationship between mortality and divine wisdom. The petition, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12), represents the climax of the psalm's theological message. As

Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) argue, this petition is not concerned with calculating the length of life but with cultivating wisdom that enables faithful living before God in the midst of human finitude. Numbering one's days does not imply calculating the length of life but developing an awareness of life's finitude that leads to wise living. Wisdom, therefore, emerges from the recognition that human existence is limited, while God's purposes remain eternal. Such awareness encourages humility, dependence upon God, and responsible living in the present (Goldingay, 2008).

Psalm 90 also interprets death within the broader theological framework of human sinfulness and divine judgment. Human suffering and mortality are not presented merely as natural phenomena but as realities experienced within the broken relationship between humanity and God (Ps. 90:7–11). As Byassee, (2018) observes, the psalm interprets mortality not simply as an inevitable feature of human existence but within the covenantal relationship in which sin, divine judgment, and God's mercy are inseparably related. Nevertheless, the psalm does not conclude with despair. Instead, it turns toward prayer, seeking God's compassion, steadfast love, and the renewal of human life (Ps. 90:13–17). As Anderson and Bishop (2000) argue, the psalm moves from the recognition of human sinfulness and mortality toward renewed confidence in God's enduring mercy and sustaining presence. This movement from lament to hope reflects the theological structure of Psalm 90 itself. As Terrien and Jonker (2005) observe, the psalm is intentionally arranged so that reflection on mortality culminates in prayer for God's compassion and steadfast love, thereby transforming human awareness of death into renewed confidence in God's faithfulness (Kidner, 2014).

From an existential perspective, Psalm 90 resonates closely with the philosophical understanding of human finitude. The awareness of death becomes the starting point for discovering authentic existence, not because death itself provides meaning, but because it directs human beings toward a life lived wisely before God. Unlike purely existential philosophy, however, the psalm locates the ultimate source of meaning not within human autonomy but in God's eternal presence. Human finitude, therefore, becomes the context in which divine grace, wisdom, and hope are most clearly experienced (Tillich, 2008; Heidegger, 1962).

Consequently, Psalm 90 provides a rich theological foundation for engaging cultural understandings of death. Its emphasis on mortality, wisdom, hope, and God's eternal sovereignty establishes an interpretive framework through which the existential meaning of death can be explored in dialogue with the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'*. Rather than reducing death to an unavoidable biological event, the psalm presents mortality as an invitation to live faithfully before God while seeking wisdom that transcends the limits of temporal existence.

3. Death in the Tradition of *Rambu Solo'*

Among the Torajan people, death is understood as a profound social, cultural, and spiritual reality rather than merely the cessation of biological life. This understanding is most clearly expressed through the tradition of *Rambu Solo'*, the customary funeral ceremony that occupies a central place in Torajan society. More than a sequence of ritual activities, *Rambu Solo'* functions as a cultural institution through which the community interprets death, expresses collective identity, and maintains social cohesion across generations (Pasasa, 2014; Sapril, 2022).

Within the Torajan worldview, death is commonly perceived as a transition from earthly existence to another stage of life. Traditionally, the deceased is not immediately regarded as completely separated from the family but remains symbolically connected with the living until the funeral rituals are completed. Consequently, *Rambu Solo'* serves not only to honor the deceased but also to facilitate the transition from the world of the living to the ancestral realm according to the traditional cosmological understanding of Torajan culture (Anggraeni & Putri, 2020).

The communal character of *Rambu Solo'* distinguishes it from many other funeral traditions. The ceremony involves extensive participation by relatives, neighbors, and the wider community, reflecting the Torajan understanding that death is a collective rather than an individual experience. Recent sociological studies further suggest that *Rambu Solo'* functions not only as a funeral ritual but also as a space of communal encounter and interreligious engagement, where people from different religious backgrounds participate in shared expressions of solidarity and mutual respect (Ambakaraeng, Lattu, & Adi, 2024). Mutual cooperation, kinship obligations, and reciprocal social relationships are reaffirmed through the various ceremonial activities, transforming mourning into an expression of communal solidarity. In this sense, death becomes an occasion for strengthening social bonds and preserving cultural identity (Novita et al., 2024).

Another significant dimension of *Rambu Solo'* is its symbolic richness. Ritual elements such as the sacrifice of buffaloes, ceremonial processions, traditional architecture, and verbal expressions communicate cultural meanings concerning honor, remembrance, and respect for the deceased. Among these symbols, the tau-tau occupies a distinctive place as a cultural representation of the deceased. Rather than functioning merely as a decorative object, the tau-tau embodies remembrance, family identity, and the continuing social memory of the deceased within the Torajan community (Tangkelayuk et al., 2021). These symbols function as cultural narratives through which the Torajan community interprets mortality, continuity, and the relationship between past and present generations. Rather than serving merely ritualistic purposes, they embody collective memories that shape the community's understanding of life and death (Pasasa, 2014).

The encounter between Christianity and Torajan culture has introduced new theological interpretations of *Rambu Solo'*. As Christianity became the dominant religion in Toraja, many traditional practices were reinterpreted in light of biblical teaching while numerous cultural values—such as mutual assistance, respect for the deceased, family solidarity, and communal participation—continued to be preserved. Consequently, *Rambu Solo'* today represents a dynamic interaction between inherited cultural traditions and Christian faith, giving rise to ongoing theological reflection concerning which cultural elements may be appreciated, transformed, or critically evaluated from a biblical perspective (Kristanto et al., 2024).

From an existential perspective, *Rambu Solo'* may be understood as a cultural narrative through which the Torajan people seek meaning in the face of mortality. The ritual does not eliminate the reality of death; rather, it provides a communal framework within which grief, remembrance, hope, and human relationships are interpreted and expressed. Death thus becomes an event that encourages reflection on the value of life, the continuity of community, and the significance of human existence within a larger cultural and spiritual horizon (Rongrean, 2024).

Accordingly, the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'* offers an important cultural context for dialogue with Psalm 90. While the biblical text emphasizes human finitude before the eternal God, *Rambu Solo'* expresses how a community interprets mortality through ritual, memory, and social participation. These two interpretive traditions do not necessarily stand in opposition; instead, they provide complementary perspectives that may enrich a contextual theological understanding of death and the meaning of life.

WRITE DOWN YOUR STUDIES AND FINDINGS

Research Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using an existential hermeneutical approach to explore the meaning of death as presented in Psalm 90 and its dialogue with the Torajan funeral tradition of *Rambu Solo'*. Qualitative research was considered appropriate because the objective of this study was not to measure social phenomena quantitatively but to interpret meanings embedded in biblical texts and cultural practices. The research sought to understand how the theological message of Psalm 90 and the cultural understanding of death in *Rambu Solo'* may interact to construct a contextual interpretation of death and the meaning of life (Creswell, 2016). This study adopts a descriptive-interpretive qualitative design. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, descriptive-interpretive research aims to explore and interpret meanings embedded in texts, symbols, and lived experiences through a dialogical process of understanding (Gule, 2022).

The principal interpretive framework of this study was existential hermeneutics. This approach understands interpretation as a process that goes beyond the historical reconstruction of a text by exploring its existential significance for contemporary human existence. Drawing primarily on Martin Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death, the study interprets death not merely as the termination of biological life but as a fundamental existential reality that shapes authentic human existence (Heidegger, 1962). This perspective enables Psalm 90 to be read as an existential text that calls readers to recognize human finitude and to seek wisdom before God.

To complement this existential perspective, the study also adopted Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics. Ricoeur argues that a written text possesses semantic autonomy and continually generates new meanings through dialogue with different historical and cultural contexts (Ricoeur, 1976). Accordingly, Psalm 90 was interpreted not only within its original biblical setting but also in conversation with the cultural narrative of *Rambu Solo'*. This dialogical hermeneutical process made it possible to examine both the convergences and divergences between biblical theology and Torajan cultural understanding without reducing one perspective to the other (Ricoeur, 2014). This dialogical process also resonates with Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons in which understanding emerges through the encounter between the historical horizon of the text and the contemporary horizon of its readers. Rather than eliminating differences, interpretation allows these horizons to interact, generating new theological insight while preserving the integrity of both Scripture and cultural context (Gadamer, 1975).

The primary data consisted of the biblical text of Psalm 90 and documentary sources concerning the tradition of *Rambu Solo'*.

Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journal articles, theological studies, and previous research related to existential philosophy, biblical hermeneutics, contextual theology, and Torajan culture. Documentary analysis served as the principal method of data collection because both the biblical text and cultural traditions have been extensively documented in theological, anthropological, and historical literature (Goldingay, 2008; Pasasa, 2014).

Data analysis was conducted through four interconnected stages. First, the theological themes of Psalm 90 concerning mortality, divine eternity, wisdom, and human finitude were identified through close textual reading. Second, the cultural meanings of death embodied in *Rambu Solo'* were examined by analyzing its ritual symbols, communal values, and traditional worldview. Third, both interpretive traditions were brought into a hermeneutical dialogue using Heidegger's existential perspective and Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics to identify their converging and diverging understandings of death and the meaning of life. Finally, the findings were synthesized to formulate a contextual theological interpretation that remains faithful to the biblical witness while appreciating the cultural wisdom preserved within the Torajan funeral tradition.

Rather than comparing two independent systems of thought, this research employed a dialogical hermeneutical approach in which biblical theology and local culture mutually illuminate one another. Through this process, the study sought to demonstrate that existential hermeneutics provides an appropriate interpretive framework for constructing a contextual theology of death that is both biblically grounded and culturally meaningful within the contemporary Torajan context.

1. Reading Psalm 90 Through Existential Hermeneutics

Psalm 90 presents a profound theological reflection on the relationship between God's eternity and human mortality. Read through the lens of existential hermeneutics, the psalm reveals that death is not merely the conclusion of biological existence but a defining reality that shapes the meaning of human life. The opening verses establish a striking contrast between the eternal nature of God and the transitory condition of humanity. While God exists "from everlasting to everlasting," human beings are portrayed as creatures who inevitably return to dust (Ps. 90:1–3). This contrast provides the existential foundation of the psalm by locating human existence within the horizon of finitude while affirming God's eternal sovereignty (Goldingay, 2008).

From Heidegger's perspective, the certainty of death distinguishes human existence from all other forms of life because only human beings are capable of anticipating their own mortality. Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death (*Sein zum Tode*) suggests that authentic existence begins when individuals acknowledge death as an unavoidable possibility that continually accompanies life (Heidegger, 1962). Psalm 90 resonates with this existential insight by presenting mortality not as an unexpected interruption but as an inherent condition of human existence. The psalm repeatedly reminds its readers that life is fragile, limited, and entirely dependent upon God.

The metaphor describing humanity as grass that flourishes in the morning but withers by evening (Ps. 90:5–6) further illustrates the transient character of human life. Rather than emphasizing hopelessness, this imagery invites reflection on the brevity of existence and the necessity of living wisely. Human achievements,

social status, and material possessions are ultimately temporary, while God's faithfulness remains constant. In this respect, the awareness of mortality becomes an existential invitation to reconsider personal priorities and to recognize the limitations of human self-sufficiency (Tillich, 2008).

The existential climax of Psalm 90 appears in verse 12: "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Brueggemann and Bellinger (2014) likewise interpret this prayer as the theological center of the psalm, where awareness of mortality becomes the foundation for wisdom rather than despair. This petition does not encourage calculating the duration of life but cultivating an attitude of wisdom grounded in the awareness of mortality. Within an existential hermeneutical perspective, numbering one's days signifies embracing the reality of human finitude so that every moment of life is lived with responsibility and purpose. Authentic wisdom emerges not from denying death but from accepting it as an integral dimension of human existence before God (Goldingay, 2008; Heidegger, 1962).

Nevertheless, Psalm 90 differs fundamentally from Heidegger's philosophical interpretation of mortality. Although both acknowledge the inevitability of death, the psalm locates the ultimate source of meaning not in human authenticity alone but in God's eternal presence. Human finitude is interpreted within a covenantal relationship in which divine mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness transcend the limits of temporal existence. The closing verses therefore move from lament toward hope, asking God to satisfy His people with steadfast love and to establish the work of their hands (Ps. 90:13–17). This movement from lament to hope reflects the theological dynamic emphasized by Anderson and Bishop (2000), who argue that the Psalms consistently transform human experiences of suffering into renewed trust in God's covenant faithfulness. Terrien and Jonker (2005) likewise emphasize that the literary movement of Psalm 90 intentionally leads readers from the reality of human mortality to renewed dependence upon God's covenant faithfulness. This theological movement demonstrates that the recognition of death ultimately leads to renewed dependence upon God rather than existential isolation (Tillich, 1976).

Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics further deepens this interpretation by emphasizing that biblical texts continue to generate meaning when they encounter new historical and cultural contexts (Ricoeur, 1976). Psalm 90 is therefore understood not merely as an ancient poetic reflection on mortality but as a living theological narrative that continually addresses contemporary readers. Its message concerning human finitude, divine eternity, and the search for wisdom transcends its original historical setting and becomes relevant within different cultural traditions, including the Torajan understanding of death.

Accordingly, the existential reading of Psalm 90 demonstrates that mortality is neither meaningless nor solely a consequence of biological limitation. Instead, death functions as an existential horizon that invites human beings to live wisely, responsibly, and faithfully before God. This interpretation provides the theological foundation for engaging the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'*, where death likewise becomes a significant moment for reflecting upon the meaning of life, human relationships, and the continuity of communal existence. The following section therefore explores how the cultural narrative of *Rambu Solo'* both converges with and differs from the existential vision articulated in Psalm 90, thereby

opening the possibility for a constructive hermeneutical dialogue between biblical theology and Torajan culture.

2. Interpreting *Rambu Solo'* as a Cultural Narrative of Death

The existential reading of Psalm 90 provides a theological perspective through which the Torajan funeral tradition may be interpreted beyond its ritual expressions. Rather than viewing *Rambu Solo'* merely as a customary ceremony, this study interprets it as a cultural narrative that articulates the Torajan understanding of death, human relationships, and the continuity of communal existence. Within this perspective, *Rambu Solo'* functions not only as a social institution but also as a medium through which the community constructs meaning in the face of mortality (Pasasa, 2014; Sapril, 2022).

One of the most significant findings of this study is that death in *Rambu Solo'* is understood primarily as a transition rather than a final termination of existence. The ritual process reflects the belief that the deceased continues to occupy an important place within the social and symbolic life of the family until the funeral rites are completed. Consequently, death is experienced not simply as biological loss but as a gradual movement from one existential condition to another. This understanding enables the bereaved family to reinterpret grief within a broader cultural framework that emphasizes continuity rather than separation (Anggraeni & Putri, 2020).

The communal character of *Rambu Solo'* also reveals a distinctive interpretation of death. Unlike individualistic understandings that regard death primarily as a personal event, the Torajan tradition locates mortality within the life of the community. Funeral rituals involve extensive participation by relatives, neighbors, and customary institutions, demonstrating that the meaning of death is collectively constructed through shared responsibility, mutual assistance, and social solidarity. The deceased remains connected with the living through communal remembrance, while the community itself reaffirms its cultural identity through active participation in the ritual (Novita et al., 2024).

From Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics, *Rambu Solo'* may be understood as a cultural text whose symbols communicate meanings that extend beyond their ritual performance (Ricoeur, 1976). Ceremonial practices, sacrificial animals, traditional speeches, and ritual processions together form a narrative through which the Torajan people interpret mortality, honor, kinship, and communal memory. These symbolic actions do not merely preserve inherited customs; they also shape the community's continuing interpretation of life and death across successive generations.

Heidegger's existential perspective further illuminates the meaning embedded within these rituals. Although *Rambu Solo'* differs significantly from Heidegger's philosophical framework, both acknowledge that the awareness of death profoundly influences human existence. The funeral ceremony creates a communal space in which participants encounter the reality of mortality, reflect upon the fragility of life, and reaffirm the importance of social relationships. In this sense, *Rambu Solo'* becomes an existential event that invites the living to reconsider the meaning of their own lives rather than merely commemorating the deceased (Heidegger, 1962; Rongrean, 2024).

The study also finds that the contemporary practice of *Rambu Solo'* reflects an ongoing interaction between traditional Torajan culture and Christian faith. While certain cosmological assumptions of the traditional belief system differ from biblical teaching, many of the ethical values embodied in the ritual—such as honoring the deceased, strengthening family solidarity, practicing mutual assistance, and expressing communal compassion—remain compatible with Christian pastoral ministry. This interaction demonstrates that cultural traditions need not be viewed solely as objects of rejection or preservation but may become partners in theological reflection through critical and contextual interpretation (Kristanto et al., 2024).

Accordingly, this study interprets *Rambu Solo'* not simply as a funeral ritual but as a cultural narrative that continually shapes the Torajan understanding of death and the meaning of life. Through its symbols, communal participation, and ritual practices, the tradition offers an existential interpretation of mortality that complements, while at certain points challenges, the theological vision articulated in Psalm 90. This observation establishes the basis for the following section, which brings the biblical text and the Torajan cultural narrative into a direct hermeneutical dialogue in order to formulate a contextual theology of death.

3. Hermeneutical Dialogue Between Psalm 90 and *Rambu Solo'*

The existential interpretation of Psalm 90 and the cultural narrative embodied in *Rambu Solo'* reveal two distinct yet complementary approaches to understanding death. While Psalm 90 presents mortality within the theological horizon of God's eternal sovereignty, *Rambu Solo'* interprets death through communal memory, ritual practice, and cultural continuity. Rather than treating these perspectives as mutually exclusive, this study brings them into a hermeneutical dialogue in order to explore how biblical theology and local culture may enrich one another in constructing a contextual understanding of death (Ricoeur, 1976).

A significant point of convergence lies in their shared recognition of human finitude. Psalm 90 repeatedly emphasizes that human beings are temporary creatures who inevitably return to dust, whereas *Rambu Solo'* acknowledges the certainty of death through elaborate funeral rituals that publicly affirm the reality of mortality. Both traditions therefore reject the illusion that human existence is permanent. Instead, death becomes the existential horizon through which the value and meaning of life are reconsidered (Goldingay, 2008; Heidegger, 1962).

The dialogue also reveals a common concern for the ethical implications of mortality. In Psalm 90, the awareness of death culminates in the prayer, "Teach us to number our days," expressing the desire to live wisely before God. Similarly, *Rambu Solo'* encourages the living to reaffirm kinship obligations, communal responsibility, and mutual solidarity through participation in funeral ceremonies. Although these ethical expressions arise from different theological and cultural foundations, both demonstrate that the awareness of mortality should transform the way people relate to others and understand their responsibilities within the community (Pasasa, 2014; Sapril, 2022).

Despite these convergences, important theological differences also emerge. Psalm 90 interprets death within the covenant relationship between humanity and God. Human mortality is understood in relation to divine judgment, mercy, and the hope that arises from

God's enduring faithfulness. In contrast, *Rambu Solo'* traditionally interprets death within a cosmological framework shaped by ancestral beliefs and ritual obligations. Consequently, the ultimate source of hope differs significantly. Whereas the biblical text directs human hope toward God's eternal presence, the traditional Torajan worldview emphasizes the successful completion of ritual processes and the harmonious relationship between the deceased, the family, and the community (Goldingay, 2008; Anggraeni & Putri, 2020). The symbolic role of tau-tau illustrates this tension. While it functions culturally as a memorial preserving the identity and memory of the deceased, Christian theology must carefully distinguish remembrance from any interpretation that attributes salvific or mediatorial significance to ancestral representations (Tangkelayuk et al., 2021).

Beyond theological differences, the dialogue also raises important socio-economic concerns. Contemporary studies have shown that the increasing costs of *Rambu Solo'*, together with expectations related to social status and customary obligations, often place considerable financial pressure on families (Tenrigau et al., 2024). Such realities invite a critical theological evaluation of whether cultural prestige may at times overshadow the pastoral and spiritual meaning of death.

From Ricoeur's perspective, these differences should not be understood as barriers that prevent dialogue but as opportunities for new interpretation. Ricoeur argues that meaning emerges when different interpretive worlds encounter one another, allowing both continuity and transformation to occur (Ricoeur, 1976). Accordingly, Psalm 90 does not simply replace the cultural narrative of *Rambu Solo'*, nor does *Rambu Solo'* redefine the theological message of Psalm 90. Instead, both enter into a dialogical relationship in which the biblical text offers theological discernment while the cultural tradition provides existential concreteness through lived human experience.

Heidegger's existential hermeneutics further clarifies this dialogue by emphasizing that authentic existence begins with the acknowledgment of mortality. Both Psalm 90 and *Rambu Solo'* confront individuals with the inevitability of death, yet they respond differently to that reality. Psalm 90 invites human beings to seek wisdom through dependence upon God, whereas *Rambu Solo'* expresses the search for meaning through communal participation and cultural remembrance. These approaches should not be viewed merely as competing explanations but as complementary dimensions of human existence that address both the vertical relationship between humanity and God and the horizontal relationship among members of the community (Heidegger, 1962; Rongrean, 2024).

The findings of this study indicate that existential hermeneutics provides an effective framework for mediating the dialogue between biblical theology and Torajan culture. Rather than rejecting local tradition or accepting it uncritically, existential hermeneutics enables a process of critical appropriation in which cultural values are evaluated in light of the biblical witness while preserving those elements that enrich Christian understanding of life and death. Values such as communal solidarity, respect for the deceased, compassion for the bereaved, and mutual responsibility may therefore be affirmed as significant expressions of Christian pastoral life, whereas beliefs that conflict with the biblical understanding of God's saving work require theological reinterpretation (Kristanto et al., 2024). The dialogical character of *Rambu Solo'* is also evident in its capacity to create a shared social

space across religious boundaries. As Ambakaraeng, Lattu, and Adi (2024) argue, the ritual has become a medium of interreligious engagement, demonstrating that cultural traditions may foster dialogue and social cohesion without erasing religious distinctiveness.

This dialogue ultimately demonstrates that death is not simply the end of biological existence nor merely the object of ritual observance. Rather, it becomes an existential and theological reality through which human beings are invited to reflect on the meaning of life, the nature of community, and their relationship with God. Psalm 90 provides the theological orientation for understanding mortality, while *Rambu Solo'* illustrates how a community embodies that awareness through cultural practice. Together, they contribute to the development of a contextual theology of death that remains faithful to Scripture while engaging seriously with the lived experiences of the Torajan people.

4. Toward a Contextual Theology of Death

The hermeneutical dialogue between Psalm 90 and the Torajan tradition of *Rambu Solo'* demonstrates that a contextual theology of death cannot be constructed by privileging either biblical theology or cultural tradition in isolation. Instead, it emerges through a process of critical dialogue in which Scripture provides the primary theological norm while local culture offers the existential context in which biblical truth is interpreted and embodied. The communal and dialogical character of *Rambu Solo'*, including its role in fostering interreligious engagement, demonstrates that local culture can serve as an important context in which Christian theology is embodied and communicated, provided that it remains critically evaluated in the light of Scripture (Ambakaraeng, Lattu, & Adi, 2024). Such an approach neither rejects cultural traditions indiscriminately nor accepts them uncritically; rather, it seeks theological discernment that enables the Christian faith to speak meaningfully within a particular cultural setting (Ricoeur, 1976; Kristanto et al., 2024).

The findings of this study suggest that death should be understood primarily as an existential reality that reveals both the limits and the significance of human life. Psalm 90 teaches that awareness of mortality leads to wisdom through dependence upon God, while *Rambu Solo'* demonstrates that death also possesses profound communal significance by strengthening solidarity, preserving collective memory, and reaffirming social responsibility. These perspectives are not contradictory but complementary, revealing that death has both theological and social dimensions that must be held together within a contextual Christian understanding.

This study further argues that the meaning of death cannot be reduced either to individual spirituality or to cultural ritual alone. Human beings encounter death simultaneously as persons standing before God and as members of a community bound together by relationships of family, memory, and mutual responsibility. Consequently, a contextual theology of death must affirm both dimensions. The vertical relationship with God provides the ultimate ground of hope, whereas the horizontal relationships within the community become concrete expressions of compassion, solidarity, and pastoral care. Such an understanding reflects the biblical vision of humanity as relational beings whose lives find meaning in communion with God and with one another (Goldingay, 2008; Tillich, 2008).

At the same time, this theological dialogue requires critical evaluation of cultural beliefs that are incompatible with the biblical

witness. While many ethical values embodied in *Rambu Solo'*, including respect for the deceased, communal solidarity, mutual assistance, and family responsibility, can be appreciated as expressions of Christian love, beliefs concerning salvation, the destiny of the dead, or ritual efficacy must be interpreted in light of Scripture. Likewise, cultural symbols such as the tau-tau may be appreciated as expressions of remembrance and family identity, provided that they are interpreted within a biblical framework that affirms God alone as the ultimate source of hope. Psalm 90 consistently directs human hope toward God's eternal faithfulness rather than toward ritual performance or ancestral mediation. Therefore, biblical theology provides the normative framework through which cultural practices are continually examined and renewed (Heidegger, 1962; Kristanto et al., 2024).

The contextual theology proposed in this study does not seek to replace Torajan cultural identity with an abstract theological system. Instead, it encourages a dynamic interaction in which Christian faith is expressed through culturally meaningful forms while remaining rooted in the authority of Scripture. Such a theology acknowledges that the Gospel becomes most transformative when it engages seriously with the lived experiences, symbols, and traditions of the community without compromising its essential theological message (Ricoeur, 1976).

This contextual understanding also contributes to pastoral theology. Funeral ministry should not merely proclaim biblical doctrines concerning death but should also accompany grieving families by recognizing the cultural meanings attached to loss, remembrance, and communal participation. The integration of biblical teaching with culturally sensitive pastoral practice enables the church to communicate the hope of the Gospel in ways that are both theologically faithful and socially meaningful within the Torajan context. In this respect, the contextual theology of death developed through this study serves not only as an academic contribution but also as a practical framework for Christian ministry among the Torajan people.

Ultimately, this study proposes that death should be understood as an invitation to authentic living before God and responsible living within the community. The existential wisdom articulated in Psalm 90 and the communal values embodied in *Rambu Solo'* together illuminate the meaning of life by reminding human beings of their finitude, their dependence upon God, and their responsibility toward others. Through this hermeneutical synthesis, a contextual theology of death emerges as a theological vision that faithfully preserves the biblical message while engaging constructively with the cultural realities of contemporary Torajan society.

5. Implications for Christian Funeral Ministry

The contextual theology of death developed through this study offers several important implications for Christian funeral ministry in the Torajan context. As demonstrated through the dialogue between Psalm 90 and the tradition of *Rambu Solo'*, effective pastoral ministry should neither disregard local cultural traditions nor accept them uncritically. Instead, funeral ministry should embody a dialogical approach in which the biblical message concerning death, hope, and eternal life is communicated within forms that are culturally meaningful while remaining faithful to the authority of Scripture (Kristanto et al., 2024).

First, Christian funeral ministry should proclaim death as an occasion for spiritual reflection rather than merely an event of grief. Psalm 90 reminds believers that awareness of mortality leads

to wisdom through dependence upon God. Funeral services therefore provide opportunities to invite individuals and communities to reflect upon the brevity of life, the certainty of death, and the hope found in God's eternal faithfulness. Such proclamation transforms funeral worship from a ceremony of farewell into a pastoral encounter that encourages authentic Christian living (Goldingay, 2008).

Second, this study affirms the importance of preserving the positive communal values embodied in *Rambu Solo'*. The tradition demonstrates that mourning is not solely an individual experience but a communal responsibility shared by family, relatives, and the wider society. Mutual assistance, solidarity, hospitality, and collective care for grieving families represent cultural values that are fully consistent with Christian pastoral ministry. Rather than replacing these practices, the church may reinterpret and strengthen them as concrete expressions of Christian love and fellowship (Pasasa, 2014; Sapril, 2022).

Third, Christian funeral ministry should exercise theological discernment when engaging traditional cultural beliefs. While many social and ethical values contained in *Rambu Solo'* can enrich pastoral practice, theological interpretations concerning salvation, the destiny of the deceased, and the efficacy of ritual must continually be evaluated in light of biblical teaching. Psalm 90 consistently directs human hope toward God's mercy and eternal sovereignty rather than toward ritual performance. Consequently, the church is called to preserve cultural values that promote human dignity and communal compassion while offering biblical reinterpretation of beliefs that are incompatible with the Gospel (Goldingay, 2008; Kristanto et al., 2024).

Fourth, this study encourages the development of culturally sensitive pastoral care for bereaved families. Grief is experienced not only as personal suffering but also as a communal and cultural reality shaped by shared memories, family relationships, and social obligations. Pastoral accompaniment should therefore recognize the emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of mourning. Such an approach enables the church to minister more effectively by integrating biblical hope with an empathetic understanding of the lived experiences of Torajan communities (Tillich, 2008).

Finally, the contextual theology proposed in this study has broader implications for theological education and ministerial formation. Future church leaders serving in culturally diverse contexts should be equipped with hermeneutical competence that enables them to interpret Scripture faithfully while engaging local traditions critically and constructively. Existential hermeneutics offers an appropriate interpretive framework for this task because it encourages dialogue between the biblical text and contemporary human experience without compromising the theological authority of Scripture (Ricoeur, 1976; Heidegger, 1962).

Accordingly, Christian funeral ministry in Toraja should be understood not merely as the performance of ecclesiastical rituals but as a holistic ministry that proclaims the hope of the Gospel, accompanies grieving communities with compassion, and appreciates the positive values of local culture through responsible theological discernment. In this way, the church fulfills its pastoral calling by bearing witness to God's eternal faithfulness while remaining meaningfully present within the cultural life of the Torajan people.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the meaning of death through an existential hermeneutical reading of Psalm 90 in dialogue with the Torajan funeral tradition of *Rambu Solo'*. By employing Martin Heidegger's existential hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics, the study demonstrates that death should be understood not merely as the end of biological existence but as an existential reality that shapes human understanding of life, wisdom, and the relationship with God and the community.

The findings reveal that Psalm 90 and *Rambu Solo'* share a common awareness of human mortality while interpreting its meaning from different perspectives. Psalm 90 presents death within the theological framework of God's eternal sovereignty, emphasizing human finitude, divine wisdom, and hope grounded in God's steadfast faithfulness. In contrast, *Rambu Solo'* expresses the communal and cultural dimensions of death through rituals that preserve solidarity, collective memory, and respect for the deceased. Rather than standing in opposition, these two interpretive traditions may enter into a constructive hermeneutical dialogue that enriches the understanding of death within the Torajan Christian context.

The principal contribution of this study lies in the formulation of a contextual theology of death that integrates biblical theology with local cultural wisdom through existential hermeneutics. The study argues that Scripture remains the primary theological norm, while culture provides the existential context in which biblical truth is interpreted and embodied. This dialogical approach enables the church to appreciate positive cultural values, such as communal solidarity, compassion, and mutual responsibility, while critically evaluating beliefs and practices that are inconsistent with the biblical witness.

The study also contributes to Christian funeral ministry by proposing a pastoral approach that combines biblical proclamation with cultural sensitivity. Funeral ministry should not only proclaim the Christian hope of eternal life but also accompany grieving communities through culturally meaningful expressions of care and solidarity. In this way, contextual theology becomes not merely an academic enterprise but a practical resource for pastoral ministry within the Torajan community.

This study is limited to an existential hermeneutical interpretation of Psalm 90 and its dialogue with the tradition of *Rambu Solo'*. Future research may broaden this discussion by examining other biblical texts concerning death, comparing funeral traditions from different cultural contexts, or incorporating empirical field research to explore how Torajan Christians understand and practice the relationship between biblical faith and local funeral traditions in contemporary society.

Ultimately, this study affirms that death, when interpreted through the dialogue between Scripture and culture, is not merely the end of life but an invitation to live wisely before God, responsibly within the community, and faithfully in the hope of God's eternal promises.

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