AOSIS

Transformation of elementary *Puang Matua* in Toraja belief system into Christianity

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This study aimed to examine missionaries' success in transforming the elementary *Puang Matua* from the Toraja religion of *Aluk Todolo* into a Christian-based one. *Puang Matua* is the name of the Toraja people's god that created the earth and everything. The concept was transformed into Christianity through contextualisation efforts to become a God of the Universe (YHWH). Descriptive analysis showed that the reconstruction was supported by the theological similarities between *Puang Matua*'s concept and the conception of God the Creator. The theological similarity is an absolute requirement for successful contextualisation to introduce Christianity into indigenous peoples strongly controlled by culture.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research could be a model for formulating a cross-cultural mission strategy that unites missiology with biblical and cultural anthropology.

Keywords: Puang Matua Bible; *Aluk Todolo*; Toraja people; missiology; cross-cultural.

Introduction

In Toraja, Christianity faced challenges in evangelising the indigenous tribes residing inland (Abialtar 2020:19), but it eventually succeeded. The local cultural community, which adheres to traditional religion, holds significant influence, and their strict adherence to ancestral teachings makes it difficult to convert them to Christianity. *Aluk Todolo*, the pre-Christian religion of the Toraja tribe, still holds a strong influence today (Duli 2015; Ismail 2019:87).

According to Van den End (1994), contextualisation played a crucial role in the success of the mission in Toraja. This was not an easy task because of the deep-rooted beliefs in tribal religion. However, the adaptation of the concept of God in *Puang Matua*, the original Toraja religion, by Western evangelists to introduce Elohim (Kruyt 2008) proved to be successful. This approach led to wider acceptance among the Toraja people, who initially rejected Christianity.

Zaluchu (2021:1–6) presented a similar case in the study of Nias Christianity in North Sumatra. The study discovered that incorporating tribal religious concepts into Christianity as part of mission strategy is crucial. In fact, using the name Lowalangi, which is the religious deity of the Nias people, as the name of God in the Universe, confirms the success of contextualisation (Zaluchu 2021:1). Kruyt (2008) also discussed the challenges of evangelism in Toraja in his book '*Keluar dari Agama Suku, Masuk ke dalam Agama Kristen* (Out of Tribal Religion, Entering Christianity)'. The difficulty arose from the natives' mistrust towards foreigners that introduced new religious beliefs. However, explaining the old belief concepts from a biblical perspective helped to alleviate their suspicion. The common thread that connects both studies is the approach of restructuring one's worldview. Therefore, introducing Christianity without contextualising it would hinder its success in achieving the Christian mission.

The objective of this research was to investigate how the Toraja community's Christian perspective integrates the concept and title of *Puang Matua*. The study aimed to determine the key elements that lead to the effective adoption of *Puang Matua* as the name of *Allah* YHWH. Successful contextualisation relies on being strongly linked to the primary and fundamental beliefs of the original faith. Once this foundation is established, all other secondary beliefs will align harmoniously.

Research methods and design

In this study, the descriptive-qualitative method described by Zaluchu (2020:29) and Creswell (2009) was utilised to explore the origins of Toraja humans from both anthropological and mythological perspectives. Additionally, the indigenous religious belief system called *Aluk Todolo* was examined, which centres around the deity known as *Puang Matua*. The final segment of the study delved into the process of transforming the Toraja main gods' worldview from *Puang Matua* to the name of God, based on religious sociology. To support the analysis, literature from reference books and journals was consulted, and critical analysis was employed in every discussion (Gilbert 2018).

Results and discussion

The origin of the Toraja Tribe

Toraja is located in the mountainous region of South Sulawesi. Despite living in the highlands, the majority of the population are farmers who cultivate crops. The area is mainly inhabited by the Toraja tribe and indigenous people. Historically, the people were immigrants who moved inland for some reason after arriving from the Gulf of Tonkin between northern Vietnam and southern China. According to Manurung (2017:111–112), the architecture of the houses of several tribes in Indonesia, including Toraja, is similar to the profile of the Dong Son culture spread across the archipelago. This is evident from the presence of pillars with the shape of the *wuwungan* roof. The architecture was commonly found in the Dong Son community in North Vietnam from 600 to 400 BC until early AD (Said 2004:13–14). This large group acculturated with local people, forming a new race and identifying themselves as Toraja people (Rahim 2017).

The *Aluk Todolo* tribe has a strong sense of their anthropological identity and beliefs in their mythological origins. According to their religious teachings, they originated from the sky and their ancestors arrived on earth using a ladder called *Eran di Langi* (stairs from the sky). This ladder serves as a connection between humans and the creator, *Puang Matua*. The Toraja community holds onto this mythology and it is passed down orally through generations (Idaman 2012:154).

The Toraja people, like many other tribes in Indonesia, have a rich culture that greatly affects their way of life and their interactions with nature. One unique aspect of their culture is the traditional house building known as 'Tongkonan' (Manurung 2017:112; Rahman 2020:7; Said 2004:52). This house design features a high floor that is elevated from the ground and faces north, with intricate carvings on the exterior that reflect the people's mythology of being descendants of the sky (Tangdilintin 2004:11–12). The roof is distinctive because the ends are tapered and towering toward the sky. The roof shape represents the people's philosophy of life called *Aluk Apa' Oto'na*, meaning four basic philosophies of life, human life, the glory of God and cultural customs (Rahman 2020:7). The *Tongkonan* represents heaven on earth,

believed to be a replica of a building that exists in the sky or heaven (Ruben 2018:43). Therefore, Plaisier (2016:35) stated that it holds great significance as a sacred place to the Toraja people.

Primitive beliefs of the Toraja Tribe

Aluk Todolo religion

Aluk Todolo is a religion of the Toraja tribe that evolved alongside their ethnicity. Like all beliefs that emerge within an ethnic group, it has a rich, complex history and teachings. As Idaman (2012:152) noted, it reflects a society where cultural values are deeply integrated into social life. Ethnocentrism is a social lifestyle that is acquired through socialisation (Kabongo 2020:2).

The *Aluk Todolo* belief system is based on mythology and developed as a way of life as the society was formed, similar to belief systems in ethnocentric communities. This ancient religion acknowledges the existence of spirits of the deceased living alongside those still alive. The centre of this belief revolves around the house, where a *Tongkonan* serves as a shared home between the living and the dead. Thus, every activity is a social act and part of worship where the deceased are either involved or witnessed. According to Plaisier (2016:35), this is a life that does not contradict the material world with the non-material world and does not contrast the religious with the profane environment. The analysis has shown that the Toraja people demonstrate an integrative unity between culture, religious rites and rituals in the *Aluk* concept (Plaisier 2016:35). Therefore, *Aluk* is a philosophy that underpins a social and religious way of life. The two are inseparable and require each other, where the main concept is the union of natural and supernatural elements. In this concept, all insights, actions, rituals and habits merge into one paradigm and human action individually and communally between living humans and ancestors.

The tribal religion of the Toraja people is called *Aluk Todolo*, which translates to ancestral religion. This term refers to the rules and teachings passed down from ancestors, rooted in Hinduism. The Indonesian government classifies it as part of the Hindu Dharma sect (Tangdilintin 1980:72). According to mythology, *Puang Matua*, the Creator, passed down this religion to *Datu Laukku's* grandmother, who was the first human in *Aluk Todolo*. The religion includes *Sukaran Aluk*, which contains provisions and religious rules that emphasise the worship and glorification of *Puang Matua* as the Creator. Animal sacrifices are offered in every religious rite and ritual (Tangdilintin 1980:73), similar to the offering of burnt sacrifices on the altar in Israelite worship of YHWH (Permana & Zaluchu 2020). This theology recognises the importance of rites and rituals in religious worship and acknowledges the presence of a creator who has made humans subordinate beings.

In the *Aluk Todolo* tradition, a significant event known as *Rambu Solo* (or *Rampe Matampu'*) is held to honour the

deceased and their funeral processions. Believers of *Aluk Todolo* consider the deceased to be in a state of *To Makula*, meaning they are unwell. According to the Torajan philosophy, death is a transition from a physical being in the natural world to a spirit in the supernatural world. To prepare the deceased for this transition, the *Rambu Solo* ceremony is performed. This ceremony involves offering food and drink to the deceased and sacrificing various animals such as pig and buffalo. The number of animals sacrificed is associated with the social status of the deceased's descendants in the natural world and their position in the supernatural world. The *Rambu Solo* ceremony is seen as a way to provide the deceased with provisions for their journey into the invisible realm. The final step in releasing the deceased into the sky involves burying their body in a ceremony. Tangdilintin (1980:121–122) explains that this ceremony marks the completion of the process.

The *Aluk Todolo* belief system is an integral part of the social and cultural core of the Toraja people (Smith 1992). Their family home serves as the centre of all cultural activities, which includes daily routines, rituals and ceremonies. These traditions are closely linked with family ties and social connections and are primarily maintained and promoted by the family unit. Hence, the unity and collective identity of the family are crucial for the preservation of Toraja's cultural heritage and way of life.

The concept of *Puang Matua* as creator

Puang Matua is the highest deity in *Aluk Todolo* as the creator of everything that exists materially. The creation of humans and all creatures takes place in the sky *(lan tangngana langi')* and is lowered to earth through a ladder called *Eran di Langi'* (stairs from the sky). From a theological perspective, Tallulembang (2012:21) described the event as a beginning because it happened in Paradise.

Eran Di Langi's presence is considered a connection between heaven and earth. Through it, living people establish communication with the *Puang Matua*. The relationship between humans and *Puang Matua* was initially good but became damaged because of human sins. The sin originated from a created person named Londong in *Rura* who married two of his biological children. This violation broke the nature of *Puang Matua*'s harmony with humans (Tallulembang 2012:22). The ladder connecting *Eran di Langi'* was destroyed, and the communication instrument between the Creator and creation was damaged. Although they no longer have a direct relationship, *Puang Matua* still loves humans.

In the death ritual of this culture, it is believed that the deceased person returns to the realm of *Puang Matua*. However, before reaching this realm, the souls must wait in *Puya*, which is a place where the souls prepare to leave Earth. *Puya* is thought to exist in a specific location on Earth where *Eran in the Langi'* once stood, but it is not the final destination. The spirits of the dead move on from *Puya* to *Langi*, which is considered the origin of human ancestors and where *Puang*

Matua resides. Unfortunately, the procession to *Puang Matua's* realm became impossible because of a disconnection with the creator. To restore relationships, *Puang Matua* sent a saviour named *To Manurun Tamboro Langi'*, meaning 'messenger from the sky'. The main role of the messenger is to perform the *dirapai'* ritual, which is the highest ritual in the death ceremony known as death (Tallulembang 2012:22). However, this heavenly messenger is only interested in the descendants of the dead that carry out the ceremony. This shows that not all or some of the dead remain in *Puya* (Tallulembang 2012:23). The situation is dominated by the socio-cultural aspect. The Toraja people compete to carry out death rituals to honour their ancestors in *Puya* and ensure the safety of their descendants who are still living on earth.

Contextualisation of *Puang Matua* in Christianity

The Toraja people's conversion to Christianity was facilitated by the missionaries who redefined the concept of *Puang Matua* and presented him as the God of the universe, known as YHWH. *Puang Matua* is the central belief of the Toraja people, encompassing the creation, nature and humanity. Altering this core concept resulted in changes to other components of their religious beliefs.

Converting local beliefs into Christianity can be a challenging process, as noted by Van De Loosdrecht, a missionary who began his ministry in Toraja in 1913. He and his family arrived in Palopo on 01 November 1913, and began their ministry in Rantepao Toraja on 07 November of the same year (Plaisier 2016:171). However, the locals opposed his presence as a foreigner. At that time, it was difficult for the Toraja people to accept new ideas and change their existing ways. As Hesselgrave (2013:227) points out, missionaries face a problem as the respondents are in power and control of their local beliefs. It is challenging for indigenous people to escape from their identity. Therefore, during the preaching of the gospel, missionaries often draw parallels between the Christian faith and the *Aluk Todolo* religion's custom concepts (Plaisier 2016:180).

From a missionary perspective, the Toraja region maintains its cultural values by integrating them into their daily lives through mythological stories and traditional house architecture (Plaisier 2016:367). As such, Gereformeerde Zendingsbond (GZB) approaches gospel preaching with ethical missiology in mind. Missiologist Kruyt was present to pay tribute to the culture and religion of the primitive Toraja people, without any intention of destroying their customs (Plaisier 2016:367). This ethical missiological concept aligns with Hesselgarve's cross-cultural communication approach, which stresses the importance of understanding the respondent's local culture when encountering the gospel. If the respondent is resistant to changing their worldview, the reporter must use coded language and adopt the respondent's vocabulary to convey the gospel message (Hesselgrave 2013:161). Therefore, Zijlstra, a missionary in Toraja, patiently explores the local mindset to preach the gospel in a way that

is easily understood by the public. Contextualisation is important, and finding a connection point in the local religiosity insight allows for the natural maintenance of the local culture without imposing western customs onto the local Toraja Christians (Plaisier 2016:367).

As Plaisier's (2016:180) teaching concept, all humans have a common ancestor. Van De Loosdrecht highlights that the Toraja *Aluk todolo* religion practised monotheism worship, where the ancestors believed in *Puang Matua* as the creator and sustainer of heaven and earth. *Puang Matua* is considered as the main deity who rules the lower deities, known as gods *(Deata)*, who convey human desires to *Puang Matua*. Therefore, offerings made by humans are solely intended for *Psuang Matua*. The Toraja Bible's translation and every Gospel preacher use the name *Puang Matua*, which is equivalent to the name of God in Christianity's methodological, epistemology and theological concepts of faith, as explained by Plaisier (2016:372).

According to Meylano (2019:8–9), *Puang Matua* was first named by Antonia Aris van De Loosdrecht, a Dutch missionary. *Puang Matua* is similar to YHWH as described in Genesis chapter 1, in terms of methodology, epistemology and theology. The world and everything in it were created, and the Creator is the supreme being who must be worshipped on His throne in Heaven. This understanding of *Puang Matua* is also shared by the Toraja people. This theological similarity makes it easier to introduce Christian concepts from a missiological perspective. Establishing belief and trust is a crucial aspect of the social concept, as explained by Karecki (2000:16). This factor facilitates the manifestation of local faith within the community.

The process of transforming *Puang Matua* has been lengthy because of differing perspectives among missionaries regarding the contextualisation of God's name (YHWH). In addition, there are differences in the beliefs of the Toraja indigenous people, as described in *Aluk Todolo* and the Bible, about the name of God (YHWH). The Toraja people see a difference in meaning between *Puang Matua* and God as described in the Christian Bible. According to their mythology, *Puang Matua* is not God First, but rather came into existence as a result of a union between heaven and earth. He (*Puang Matua*) defines customary practices and prohibitions (*Aluk Sola Pemali*), rewards kindness and punishes the wicked. He resides at the top of the sky, which is the centre point of the world above (Plaisier 2016:372). The concept of offerings in ancestral religious rituals is meant for *Puang Matua*, who is seen as the main god. Therefore, contextualisation is necessary when preaching the gospel, so that listeners can more easily accept its meaning and connect it with the concept of God in Christianity.

Initially, missionaries introduced the concept of *Puang Allah*, but the name did not gain popularity among the Toraja people (Tokam 2018:26). To address this, Van de Loosdrecht suggested using the name *Puang Matua* as a translation for *Allah* (Elohim), which was later adopted as an official translation in the Toraja Bible (Meylano 2019:7). The missionaries recognised the Toraja people's strong tradition and commitment to local wisdom (Pajarianto, Pribadi & Sari 2022:4), which worked to Christianity's advantage. After accepting the gospel and undergoing conversion, the people have preserved the values and teachings of Christianity as their new tradition, which must be guarded and nurtured in keeping with their ancestors' values.

The missionaries transformed the concept of *Puang Matua* into the name of God (YHWH) through contextualisation. This involves interpreting a worldview and placing it into a specific context, taking into account the socio-historical environment of the recipient of the concept (Darwis 2019:329). This tactic also involves using language from a particular community context to make them more accepting of new ideas (Seyyedrezaie & Ghasem Barani 2018). Hesselgrave (2013:131) emphasised that contextualisation is about incorporating Biblical concepts into all human struggles throughout history to understand what God is saying in that context. Kraft emphasised that theological truth must be re-created as a dynamic translation that corresponds with the listener's ideas and language for them to understand its relevance. According to Robert McAfee Brown, the gospel impacts cultural and social contexts, and it is crucial to put the gospel in a local context (Bevans 2002:69). Missionaries used cultural symbols, traditions, values and worldviews of local communities to introduce Christian concepts (Hesselgrave 2013:160; Mashoko 2005:15; Tangkudung 2012:42). This approach helped communities to better understand and accept the gospel according to their specific situations.

Cultural symbols can help people from different cultures communicate with each other. However, sometimes religious traditions can clash with cultural traditions. To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to present religious teachings in a way that makes sense within the cultural context. According to Ustorf (2008), we need to rethink how we spread religious ideas in order to overcome cultural barriers. It is also important to remember that introducing new religious ideas should not feel like an invasion of an existing culture. Instead, we should try to present religious teachings in a way that fits with the existing culture (Ustorf 2008). Fung (2003) did just that when he introduced Christian theology into Malaysian culture. He developed new approaches that helped people understand the goodness of creation, the importance of service, the idea of incarnation, the power of resurrection, the presence of the spirit and the 'principle of the sound tree'. By adapting religious teachings to fit with local cultures, we can help more people understand and appreciate them. The proposed models gained widespread acceptance and success, but some argue that they have undermined traditional Malaysian culture and values. This phenomenon is also observed in Toraja, where important biblical messages are expressed through the people's philosophical and social beliefs. Kruyt (2008) successfully employed an ethno-missiological approach to

convert the Poso community in Central Sulawesi to Christianity, despite their strong animistic and dynamic beliefs. Although the process was slow, it eventually led to the publication of a book entitled '*Keluar dari Agama Suku Masuk ke dalam Agama Kristen* (Out of Tribal Religion Entering Christianity)' (Kruyt 2008), which became a reference for cross-cultural missiology. These experiences demonstrate that contextualised evangelism does not diminish the significance of Jesus' mission to preach the gospel worldwide. Therefore, incorporating elements of the local culture, such as using the name Allah the Almighty in place of a traditional deity, can be a part of intercultural mission strategy.

According to Durkheim (2011:8), modern-day religion has taken on an elementary form. *Puang Matua* is an example of this, representing the Toraja people's ancestral religion that has been generalised into a Christian concept. Durkheim's ideas strongly support this approach, making it an effective strategy for missionaries to adopt. By focusing on the most primitive and straightforward form of religion within Torajan beliefs, they can introduce this elementary form as a socialisation strategy to the general public (Durkheim 2011:8). This means that tribal religion's elemental sources can serve as a means to introduce Christianity as long as there are theological similarities. In the case of *Puang Matua*, it was adopted into Christianity as the name for Allah in the Universe (YHWH) because of these similarities. However, it is important to note that not all aspects of culture can be easily adopted, therefore missionaries should carefully examine these elementary forms before entering missions within cross-cultural communities.

Conclusion

In Torajan culture, there is a concept called contextualisation where the worship of *Puang Matua* is reinterpreted as God in Christianity. This has been successful in bridging cultural gaps and making Christian values more accepted in the community. Through this reconstruction, the Toraja Christian community no longer views *Puang Matua* according to ancestral religious beliefs, but rather as the Universal God from the Bible. Further research could explore the influence of Torajan culture on Christianity and potentially inform cross-cultural mission strategies globally.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

All authors contributed equally to this work.

Ethical considerations

Funding information

Data availability

Disclaimer

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