




Comparing Kayori, the oral tradition of the Pamona Tribe, Indonesia, with the Psalms



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Oral traditions serve as crucial repositories of cultural and spiritual values, shaping communal identity and moral instruction. However, comparative studies between indigenous oral traditions and biblical sacred texts remain underexplored, particularly in the context of theological inculturation. This study aimed to compare Kayori, an oral tradition of the Pamona people in Indonesia, with the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, focusing on their symbolism, structure, and social functions to assess potential avenues for contextual theological integration. The study was conducted through a comparative textual analysis, examining the poetic elements, religious significance, and community roles of both traditions within their respective cultural and theological frameworks. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, using comparative analysis and hermeneutical interpretation. Relevant literature on Kayori and the Psalms was systematically analysed to identify parallels and distinctions in theme, form, and function. While both traditions employ natural symbolism and serve as communal expressions of spirituality, they differ in theological orientation. The Psalms reflect a monotheistic framework centred on divine worship, whereas Kayori incorporates animistic and ancestral elements. In addition, the written, structured nature of the Psalms contrasts with Kayori's oral, fluid, and adaptive performance. The study highlights the opportunities and challenges of incorporating Kayori into Christian worship. Inculturation requires theological discernment to ensure that cultural adaptation enhances biblical faithfulness rather than leading to syncretism.

Contribution: This research provides a theological and anthropological framework for engaging oral traditions in contextual theology, contributing to discussions on biblical inculturation and indigenous Christian expressions.

Keywords: Kayori; Psalms; oral tradition; contextual theology; biblical inculturation; indigenous Christian worship; theological anthropology.

Introduction

Oral traditions serve as crucial repositories of cultural identity, historical memory, and moral instruction across diverse societies. These traditions function not only as a medium for artistic expression but also as an essential means of preserving communal values and reinforcing social cohesion (Finnegan 2012:51–80). Among the indigenous communities of Indonesia, the Pamona people of Central Sulawesi have maintained Kayori, an oral poetic tradition deeply embedded in traditional ceremonies, moral education, and communal gatherings (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015). Kayori, much like other oral traditions, encapsulates spiritual, ethical, and historical narratives, employing symbolism and poetic devices to articulate human relationships with nature and the divine (Nursyamsi, Tamrin & Bismawati 2023; Sunkudon et al. 2025). The integration of natural symbols such as water, trees, and mountains into Kayori reflects a sacred worldview, where nature serves as a conduit between humanity and supernatural forces (Lebaka 2015; Nyuyki 2018; Prabowo 2023). However, despite its cultural and spiritual significance, modernisation and globalisation have increasingly threatened the transmission of Kayori among younger generations (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015). Consequently, there is an urgent need to explore how this tradition may be preserved, revitalised, and reinterpreted within contemporary religious and cultural contexts.

One avenue for understanding Kayori's relevance in contemporary discourse is through a comparative analysis with the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible. The Psalms, a fundamental component of Jewish and Christian liturgical traditions, serve as expressions of prayer, lament, thanksgiving, and wisdom (Brueggemann 1997; Westermann 1981). Functioning both individually and collectively, the Psalms convey profound theological, moral, and emotional reflections (Chia 2024a; Prabowo 2023; Tsolin 2021). Despite the apparent structural, thematic, and symbolic

intersections between Kayori and the Psalms, comparative studies between biblical poetic texts and Southeast Asian oral traditions remain scarce. Extensive scholarship has examined the historical, liturgical, and theological dimensions of the Psalms (Adamo 2019, 2020), while research on Kayori has predominantly highlighted its role in cultural resilience, moral instruction, and disaster mitigation (Hasan 2015; Nole 2024; Nursyamsi et al. 2023). However, few studies have investigated the theological and literary connections between these traditions. This study seeks to address this scholarly gap by analysing the structure, themes, and functions of Kayori and the Psalms, contributing to broader discussions on biblical inculturation and theological contextualisation.

This research is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Firstly, inculturation theory (Bevans 2002) provides a framework for examining how Christian theology may engage with indigenous traditions without compromising biblical orthodoxy. The interaction between faith and culture allows for the adaptation of religious expressions while maintaining theological integrity (Duncan 2014; Fernandes, Chia & Terok 2023; Sanou 2013). Secondly, the hermeneutics of symbolism (Charles H. Kraft 2005) is employed to analyse the spiritual and cultural significance of poetic language in both traditions. In oral traditions, symbolic representations function as mediators of meaning, facilitating a communal and transcendent understanding of the human-divine relationship (Lebaka 2015; WL Sigilipu dan PDO Sigilipu 2015). Lastly, comparative theological methodology (Adamo 2019) provides the necessary analytical tools to identify both convergences and divergences between Kayori and the Psalms, highlighting their respective roles within liturgical, social, and theological contexts (Chia 2024b; Dunaetz 2019; Sunkudon et al. 2025).

This study aims to critically examine the similarities and differences between Kayori and the Psalms, with a specific focus on poetic structure, thematic emphasis, and social function. The primary objectives are to: (1) identify thematic and symbolic parallels between Kayori and the Psalms, (2) analyse the structural and functional distinctions between these traditions, (3) evaluate the theological implications of incorporating Kayori elements into Christian worship, (4) contribute to broader discussions on contextual theology and biblical inculturation in Southeast Asia.

By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to provide a nuanced theological and anthropological framework for understanding how indigenous oral traditions may interact with biblical texts, offering insights into faithful inculturation within Christian theology.

Research methods and design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a comparative methodology to examine the structural, thematic, and functional differences between Kayori and the Psalms. The comparative approach is appropriate for identifying symbolic, theological, and literary intersections

between these two traditions, contributing to broader discussions on biblical inculturation and contextual theology (Adamo 2019; Lebaka 2015). By focusing on textual and literary analysis, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how indigenous oral traditions engage with biblical poetry.

The research is conducted within the ethnographic and theological context of the Pamona community in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. The Pamona people have a rich oral tradition, where Kayori serves as a medium for cultural preservation, moral instruction, and spiritual reflection (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015). In contrast, the Psalms originate within the Hebrew biblical tradition, functioning as a liturgical and devotional text in Jewish and Christian worship (Brueggemann 1997; Prabowo 2023). Understanding the cultural and religious backgrounds of both traditions is essential for evaluating their theological and literary intersections.

This study does not involve human participants but instead focuses on textual analysis. The primary data sources include Kayori texts, selected from ethnographic studies, linguistic analyses, and cultural literature (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015; Nole 2024), and the Book of Psalms, examined using exegetical and theological sources (Adamo 2019; Westermann 1981). Secondary sources include academic literature on oral traditions, biblical poetry, and contextual theology (Bevans 2002; Charles H. Kraft 2005; Duncan 2014). The selection of texts follows purposive sampling, ensuring that both Kayori and Psalms texts included in the study reflect key symbolic, poetic, and functional themes. Inclusion criteria consist of Kayori texts that incorporate natural symbolism, moral teachings, and communal significance, Psalms that reflect poetic parallelism, theological reflection, and liturgical function, and secondary sources that provide contextual theological interpretations relevant to biblical and oral traditions.

Data were collected through extensive literature review and textual analysis, with primary sources examined through linguistic, theological, and comparative literary perspectives. Secondary sources were selected based on academic credibility, relevance to the study's objectives, and peer-reviewed status (Roosinda et al. 2021; Sugiyono 2017). The study also incorporated hermeneutical approaches to explore the theological and cultural dimensions of Kayori and the Psalms (Adamo 2019; Charles H. Kraft 2005).

The research follows a thematic content analysis approach, involving three key stages: textual analysis, in which Kayori and Psalms texts were examined for structural, thematic, and symbolic elements; coding and categorisation, where recurring motifs such as natural symbolism, moral instruction, and divine invocation were identified and classified; and comparative interpretation, which enabled the identification of parallels and divergences in their theological implications, social functions, and literary structures (Adamo 2019; Prabowo 2023). This approach ensures that the study

provides a systematic and rigorous comparative framework, aligning with established methodologies in theological and literary research (Dunaetz 2019; Fernandes et al. 2023).

As this study is based on textual analysis and does not involve human participants, it did not require approval from an ethics committee. However, all sources used in this research were obtained from credible academic publications, ensuring intellectual integrity and adherence to ethical research practices (Sunkudon et al. 2025).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Surabaya and STTII Surabaya Research Ethics Commission (No. 00371/KEP-STTII-Sby/EC/III/2025).

Results

The results of this study are presented in a structured manner to address the stated aim and objectives, focusing on structural, thematic, and functional comparisons between Kayori and the Psalms. The analysis highlights key similarities and differences in poetic form, symbolic meaning, and communal functions.

Structural comparison

Kayori is a form of oral poetic performance that combines elements of song, chant, and narrative storytelling. Its genre may best be described as a *ritual poetic chant*, which is rhythmically delivered, often improvised, and rich in symbolic meaning. Performed during communal ceremonies or ancestral rites, Kayori conveys collective memory, ethical values, and spiritual reflections. As a flexible and dynamic oral tradition, it is shaped in real time by the performer's interpretation and audience interaction. This results in variations in phrasing, length, and thematic emphasis across different performances (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015).

In contrast, the Psalms represent a fixed literary corpus embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures. They follow established poetic conventions such as *parallelism*, *acrostic structures*, and *chiastic patterns* (Brueggemann 1997; Westermann 1981). While composed in poetic form, the Psalms exhibit a high degree of literary sophistication, having been written, edited, and canonised over centuries.

Furthermore, the Psalms encompass a wide range of genres, including hymns, laments, thanksgiving songs, royal psalms, wisdom literature, communal and individual prayers, as well as imprecatory psalms (Brueggemann 1997:25). This genre diversity illustrates the rich liturgical, theological, and pastoral functions they served within ancient Israelite worship traditions.

Table 1 summarises key structural differences between Kayori and the Psalms.

TABLE 1: Structural comparison between Kayori and Psalms.

Feature	Kayori (Pamona oral tradition)	Psalms (Biblical poetry)
Medium	Oral, memorised, and performed	Written, preserved in sacred text
Structure	Flexible, varies by occasion	Fixed poetic forms with parallelism
Transmission	Passed down orally through generations	Canonical, textual preservation
Performance	Interactive, adapted in real time	Recited or sung in liturgical settings
Genre	Ritual poetic chant	Hymns, laments, prayers, wisdom, etc.

Thematic and symbolic analysis

Both Kayori and the Psalms incorporate natural imagery, but their symbolic interpretations differ significantly. Kayori reflects an animistic worldview, where rivers, mountains, and trees are imbued with spiritual significance and ancestral power (Lebaka 2015; WL Sigilipu dan PDO Sigilipu 2015). The Psalms, however, use natural symbols metaphorically, often portraying God's protection, judgement, or renewal (Adamo 2020; Prabowo 2023).

A notable example is the symbolism of water. In Kayori, water is revered as a sacred, life-giving force with spiritual significance, often associated with ancestral blessings, purification, and cosmic balance through rituals performed near rivers (Nole 2024). It is believed to carry ancestral wisdom, making it a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms (WL Sigilipu dan PDO Sigilipu 2015). In contrast, the Psalms use water metaphorically, symbolising God's provision, restoration, and spiritual renewal, as seen in *Psalms 23:2*, where 'He leads me beside still waters' signifies divine guidance and peace. Other Psalms associate water with righteousness (*Ps 1:3*), spiritual longing (*Ps 42:1*), and divine sustenance (*Ps 63:1*). This contrast reflects a fundamental theological difference – while Kayori attributes spiritual power to water, the Psalms affirm God as the ultimate source of life and renewal. Theologically, this distinction is critical for contextual theology, as any adaptation of Kayori's water symbolism into Christian worship must align with the biblical teaching that God alone is the giver of life, rather than ancestral spirits. Understanding these differences is essential for faithful inculturation, ensuring that cultural expressions enhance rather than alter biblical truth.

In addition, both traditions express human struggles and spiritual longing. Lament Psalms, such as *Psalms 142*, express cries for divine intervention: 'I pour out my complaint before Him; I tell my trouble before Him'. Similarly, many Kayori performances include poetic expressions of suffering and appeals to ancestral spirits for guidance (Filiandani 2019; Hasan 2015).

Spiritual and social functions

The social role of *Kayori* and the Psalms differs in terms of performance context and community engagement. In Pamona society, *Kayori* is integrated into social rituals –

including weddings, funerals, and crisis response gatherings – reinforcing group solidarity and offering moral instruction (Andharu & Widayati 2018; Nursyamsi et al. 2023). The Psalms, by contrast, are institutionalised within Jewish and Christian worship, used in both corporate liturgy and private devotion (Prabowo 2023; Tsolin 2021).

Functionally, *Kayori* tends to express harmony, community values, and the ancestral link between the human and the divine. Psalms, however, represent a broader theological and emotional spectrum. While many Psalms serve as vehicles of worship, thanksgiving, or lament, others contain imprecatory elements – prayers for divine justice or judgement upon enemies (e.g., Ps 35, 69, and 109). This wide range allows Psalms to express complex human emotions in the context of a covenantal relationship with God.

A comparison of their functional roles is presented in Table 2.

Implications for inculturation

Findings indicate that *Kayori* contains symbolic and poetic elements that could be contextualised within Christian worship, provided that theological discernment is applied. Some symbolic overlaps, such as nature imagery and themes of human longing, suggest potential for integration into contextual hymnody and worship expressions (Bevans 2002; Sunkudon et al. 2025). However, theological differences in cosmology and divine agency present challenges, particularly in distinguishing Christian faith from animistic elements (Duncan 2014).

Discussion

Key findings

This study has demonstrated that *Kayori* and the Psalms share structural, thematic, and functional similarities, yet differ significantly in their theological orientation and ritual applications. Both traditions utilise poetic expression and symbolic imagery, particularly through natural elements such as water, trees, and mountains. However, their underlying spiritual frameworks contrast – *Kayori* reflects an animistic and ancestral worldview, whereas the Psalms adhere to a monotheistic tradition centred on God's sovereignty. Furthermore, *Kayori* is an oral and adaptable tradition, whereas the Psalms are fixed literary compositions embedded in Jewish and Christian worship practices. These differences highlight the complexity of inculturation, particularly in determining which elements of *Kayori* can be meaningfully integrated into Christian contexts.

TABLE 2: Functional comparison between *Kayori* and Psalms.

Function	<i>Kayori</i> (Pamona oral tradition)	Psalms (Biblical poetry)
Spiritual	Expresses divine-human connection through ancestral memory and traditional spirituality	Includes praise, lament, thanksgiving, and imprecation directed to God
Social	Strengthens community identity through oral transmission and performance	Reinforces covenantal faith identity through communal and personal recitation
Ritual context	Used in weddings, funerals, and communal events	Used in temple, synagogue, and church settings, as well as in private devotion

The findings align with previous studies on theological contextualisation and oral traditions. Scholars have found that oral traditions serve as dynamic tools for moral instruction, cultural identity, and spiritual reflection (Bevans 2002; Bevans & Schroeder 2004; Faot, Octavianus & Juanda 2025; Lebaka 2015). This is evident in *Kayori*, which is deeply woven into Pamona communal life, much like oral traditions in African and Pacific contexts (Hasan 2015; Nole 2024). The Psalms, while structurally different, similarly function as a means of spiritual catharsis, theological teaching, and worship expression (Adamo 2019; Prabowo 2023).

One significant contribution of this study is its comparative approach, which highlights previously unexplored intersections between Southeast Asian oral traditions and biblical poetry. While research on indigenous liturgical adaptation has explored music, dance, and local storytelling in Christian worship, little has been done to examine how poetic oral traditions such as *Kayori* can inform biblical inculturation (Chia 2024b; Duncan 2014; Sunkudon et al. 2025). This study suggests that certain poetic structures, narrative techniques, and thematic elements from *Kayori* could be adapted within contextual Christian worship, provided that theological integrity is maintained.

Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this study is its comparative literary and theological approach, which provides a nuanced understanding of both traditions beyond mere linguistic similarities. The use of hermeneutical and thematic analysis ensures that findings are grounded in textual evidence, allowing for a systematic comparison between *Kayori* and the Psalms (Roedy Silitonga 2020; Roosinda et al. 2021; Tiladuru 2018). In addition, the study draws upon both primary and secondary sources, strengthening the validity of its interpretations.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the study relies primarily on textual and secondary sources, without field-based ethnographic data. While literature on *Kayori* provides substantial insights, direct engagement with Pamona practitioners could have enriched the analysis. Secondly, the study does not examine the historical evolution of *Kayori*, which could provide further context regarding its religious adaptations over time. Lastly, while the study identifies theological tensions in inculturating *Kayori* into Christian worship, it does not offer practical models for such integration, leaving this as an area for future research.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this study have important implications for theological inculturation, biblical scholarship, and the preservation of indigenous oral traditions. Firstly, this study suggests that *Kayori*'s poetic and symbolic elements may be integrated into contextual Christian worship, particularly in hymnody, storytelling, and communal prayers. However,

theological caution is required to distinguish biblical faith from animistic elements (Bevans 2002; Duncan 2014).

Secondly, this research contributes to comparative theology by demonstrating that Southeast Asian oral traditions contain profound spiritual reflections that merit further scholarly attention. Future research should explore how other indigenous poetic traditions relate to biblical texts, particularly in contexts where oral traditions shape theological expressions (Lebaka 2015; Nyuyki 2018).

Finally, this study underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration between biblical scholars, ethnographers, and theologians to develop practical models for inculturation. Further research could involve fieldwork with Pamona elders and Christian leaders, examining how Kayori's poetic structures could be used in liturgical settings without compromising Christian doctrine (Charles H. Kraft 2005; Duncan 2014; Faot et al. 2025; Sunkudon et al. 2025).

Conclusion

This study has provided a comparative analysis of Kayori, the oral poetic tradition of the Pamona people, and the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible, examining their structural, thematic, and functional characteristics. The findings highlight that while both traditions employ poetic expressions and symbolic imagery, they differ significantly in theological orientation, transmission, and ritual application.

In relation to the first objective, the study identified thematic and symbolic parallels between Kayori and the Psalms. Both traditions use natural imagery, lamentation, and moral instruction as central elements of their compositions. However, while Kayori attributes spiritual agency to natural elements and ancestral spirits, the Psalms use nature symbolically to reflect God's providence and sovereignty.

Regarding the second objective, the analysis revealed key structural and functional differences. Kayori remains fluid and adaptive, varying across performances, whereas the Psalms are fixed literary texts with established poetic conventions such as parallelism and chiasm. In addition, while Kayori is performed in social and ritual gatherings, the Psalms are integral to Jewish and Christian worship traditions, shaping personal devotion and communal liturgy.

The third objective examined the theological implications of inculturating Kayori into Christian worship. The study suggests that certain poetic and structural elements of Kayori could be contextualised within Christian traditions, particularly in hymnody and storytelling. However, careful theological discernment is required to ensure faithful biblical adaptation while avoiding syncretism.

In addressing the fourth objective, the research contributes to broader discussions on contextual theology and biblical inculturation in Southeast Asia. It highlights the need for further exploration of indigenous poetic traditions within

biblical scholarship, particularly regarding how oral expressions shape theological understanding and worship practices.

These findings emphasise the significance of engaging indigenous traditions within Christian theology, encouraging future studies to explore practical models for theological inculturation through interdisciplinary collaboration between biblical scholars, ethnographers, and local Christian communities.

Implications and suggestions

One significant implication is that Kayori's poetic and symbolic elements offer potential for contextualising Christian worship in Pamona and other indigenous communities. Because both Kayori and the Psalms employ rich poetic language and communal expressions, elements of Kayori could be incorporated into hymnody, liturgical readings, and storytelling. However, this must be done with theological discernment to ensure that the biblical message remains central and that adaptations do not lead to syncretism. Churches and Christian educators should develop guidelines for inculturating local traditions, ensuring alignment with biblical doctrine while valuing cultural heritage.

From a biblical scholarship perspective, this study demonstrates the value of comparative theological research, particularly between indigenous oral traditions and biblical texts. The analysis suggests that oral traditions, like Kayori, contain profound theological and moral reflections, making them an important but often overlooked resource for cross-cultural theological studies. Future research should expand comparative studies beyond the Psalms to include other biblical poetry and wisdom literature, such as Proverbs or Lamentations, to explore broader literary and theological connections.

In terms of cultural preservation, this study underscores the urgent need to document and revitalise indigenous oral traditions in the face of modernisation and globalisation. Kayori, like many other oral traditions, is at risk of disappearing as younger generations move towards written and digital modes of communication. Collaborations between academics, local cultural practitioners, and Christian leaders could facilitate initiatives to preserve and revitalise oral traditions, integrating them into faith-based education and cultural programmes.

Suggestions for future research

Ethnographic studies on Kayori in Christian worship: Future research should conduct field-based ethnographic studies on how Kayori is currently perceived and used within Christian communities. This would provide deeper insights into how local churches approach theological inculturation.

Comparative studies on other oral traditions: Further comparative research should examine other Southeast Asian oral traditions in relation to biblical poetry, prophecy, and wisdom literature, broadening the scope of contextual theology.

Practical frameworks for inculturation: Theological institutions and Christian organisations should develop practical models for incorporating indigenous poetry and oral traditions into Christian worship while ensuring doctrinal integrity.

Digital and educational initiatives for oral tradition preservation: There is a need for digital archiving projects to document and preserve Kayori, making it accessible for future generations and academic research. Developing interactive educational materials based on Kayori's themes could also be beneficial for Christian discipleship in indigenous contexts.

By addressing these implications and research gaps, future studies can contribute to a more robust and faithful approach to theological inculturation, biblical interpretation, and cultural preservation.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

J.J. was responsible for conceptualisation, theological analysis, and primary manuscript writing. P.G.O.S. carried out comparative analysis, literature review, and data collection. Y.T. was responsible for editing, reference management, and methodology structuring.

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Data availability

The data supporting this study are available from the corresponding author, J.J., upon reasonable request.

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