




Rambu Solo': A Torajan traditional funeral ritual and its theological challenges from the Catholic perspective



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This study explores *Rambu Solo'*, a traditional Torajan funeral ritual, and its intersection with Catholic theology, particularly within the context of the Christianised Torajan community in South Sulawesi. *Rambu Solo'* is a deeply symbolic practice that reflects the Torajan worldview on death, ancestral spirits and social identity, in which ancestors are believed to actively influence the living. The study addresses the tensions arising between this traditional practice and Catholic teachings on death, salvation and the communion of saints, aiming to determine the extent of its integrability and its theological boundaries within the Catholic faith.

Utilising an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that combines cultural anthropology and contextual theology, this study examines *Rambu Solo'* as a death ritual that integrates cultural, spiritual and social dimensions of society through a description of the ritual's characteristics, a theological analysis and contextual reflections based on literature studies and field interviews. The findings reveal significant theological challenges, as ancestral veneration and sacrificial practices in *Rambu Solo'* may conflict with the doctrine of Christ as the sole mediator of salvation, thereby posing a risk of syncretism. However, the study also identifies noble values within the ritual that align with Gospel principles, opening avenues for inculturation. Local Church efforts demonstrate attempts at harmonisation, including the adaptation of liturgical practices and the reinterpretation of cultural symbols.

Contribution: This research critically examines *Rambu Solo'* as both a challenge and an opportunity for Catholic doctrine. It proposes a framework for theologically responsible inculturation that provides conceptual and practical foundations for culturally sensitive pastoral strategies while contributing to contextual theology in Indonesia's multicultural societies by fostering dialogue between religious faith and local wisdom.

Keywords: *Rambu Solo'*; Catholic theology; inculturation; contextual theology; Torajan culture; syncretism.

Introduction

Culture and religion are two interwoven forces that shape social structures, collective identity, and the way communities interpret spiritual and transcendental realities (Tangdialla et al. 2024). However, this intertwining does not mean equality or unification of spiritual meaning, because culture represents the expression of universal human spirituality through symbols, rituals, and ethical values, while the Christian faith is based on divine revelation in Jesus Christ as the centre and norm of salvation. Therefore, the relationship between culture and faith must be understood in a dialogical-critical manner, namely by recognising cultural values that are in line with the gospel while also making theological assessments of elements that are not in harmony, in order to avoid the tendency towards syncretism. In the context of the Tana Toraja society in South Sulawesi, this interconnection becomes particularly evident in the performance of *Rambu Solo'*, a traditional funeral ritual rich in symbolism and deeply reflective of the local worldview (Purwanta 2022). *Rambu Solo'* not only functions as a mechanism of social transition and of honouring ancestors but also serves as a spiritual medium that bridges the material world with the realm of spirits. In practice, this ritual embodies a tangible expression of the Torajan belief system regarding death, the afterlife, and the community's enduring connection to ancestral heritage (Hasbi et al. 2019a; Pantan, Pakpahan & Wiryohadi 2024).

The study of *Rambu Solo'* carries significant socio-cultural relevance, particularly within the context of Indonesia's multicultural and multireligious society (Hasbi et al. 2019b; Moris & Rahman 2022; Nuryani, Rahman & Susanti 2022). The Torajan community, which has undergone more than a century of Christianisation, especially under the influence of the Catholic Church, now inhabits a cultural reality in which traditional practices and religious faith do not always fit

together easily. This tension creates an internal dilemma within the identity of Catholic Torajans, who strive to remain faithful to church teachings while simultaneously preserving their ancestral traditions, which are deeply rich in profound symbolic and social values (Baloyi 2014; Pabebang, Erikson & Subambang 2022). Consequently, this study holds importance not only for the Catholic community in Toraja but also more broadly for the Catholic Church in Indonesia, particularly in formulating culturally sensitive strategies of inculturation and pastoral approaches (Allo et al. 2024; Maćkowiak 2024; Pantan et al. 2024).

In the global context, this study contributes to the discussion on the encounter between universal religion and local wisdom, an issue central to the fields of religious studies, contextual theology, and the anthropology of religion (Gill 2021; Nenohai 2023). It is expected that this research will strengthen awareness of the importance of approaches that cross different fields in addressing the challenges faced by religious communities amid the complexities of local cultural dynamics (Pabebang et al. 2022).

From a scholarly perspective, this study fills a gap in knowledge in the context of Catholic theological discourse in Indonesia. Although a number of studies have examined the practice of *Rambu Solo'* from an anthropological point of view, and some initial theological reflections on the inculturation of the Catholic faith in Toraja have been made (Pantan et al. 2024), there are still limitations in systematic and in-depth theological analysis of *Rambu Solo'*, both as a challenge and as an opportunity in the light of Catholic doctrine. Departing from the definitive character of Catholic teachings, particularly regarding death, salvation, and the communion of saints (Adams 1993; Wikandatu et al. 2022), this study positions inculturation not as a form of doctrinal compromise but as a process of critical and selective theological assessment. Therefore, this study aims to explore the extent to which the symbolic elements and human values in the practice of *Rambu Solo'* can be legitimately integrated into the Catholic faith framework, while also affirming the theological boundaries that cannot be crossed in order to maintain the integrity of church teachings.

This study is original in that it does not merely position *Rambu Solo'* as a cultural object of study but rather as a point of interaction between theology and culture. By integrating approaches from cultural anthropology and systematic theology, this article offers a critical analysis of the ritual's elements that hold potential for inculturation, while also highlighting the dimensions that may conflict with the fundamental principles of the Catholic faith. Thus, the main contribution of this research lies in its understanding of the dynamics of theologically responsible inculturation, rather than mere cultural accommodation.

Specifically, this study aims to analyse the practice of *Rambu Solo'* from the perspective of Catholic theology, with a focus on identifying theological conflicts and exploring the possibilities of liturgical and cultural inculturation without compromising the integrity of church doctrine. In this study,

culture is understood as a meaningful context in which religious beliefs, symbols, and spiritual values are expressed and lived, making it a legitimate locus for theological reflection. From this perspective, *Rambu Solo'* is examined not merely as a social or ritual practice but also as a cultural expression that engages theological questions related to death, salvation, mediation, and communal faith. Through an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that combines cultural anthropology and contextual theology, this article presents a comprehensive and critical analysis of the realities faced by Torajan Catholics as they seek to remain faithful to church teaching while preserving their cultural identity.

The article examines the practice of *Rambu Solo'* through three complementary approaches: historical–anthropological, theological–doctrinal, and reflective–contextual. The first approach focuses on understanding *Rambu Solo'* from a historical and anthropological perspective as a cultural heritage of the Torajan people. Within this framework, the ritual is interpreted not merely as a series of funeral ceremonies but also as an embodiment of collective values, social structures, and spiritual beliefs of the local community. *Rambu Solo'* embodies a distinct worldview that connects human beings with their ancestors and the spirit world, which for the Torajan people constitutes an essential part of the life cycle. This anthropological perspective enables readers to grasp how death and the soul's transition are profoundly understood within Torajan culture, and how social structures are inherently involved in the organisation of the ritual as an expression of honour tied to the family's status and dignity.

The second approach, theological analysis, examines the extent to which elements of *Rambu Solo'* may be accepted or pose challenges to Catholic doctrine. As the Catholic Church understands death as a mystery of faith oriented towards salvation and resurrection in Christ, practices such as buffalo offerings, communication with ancestral spirits, and the structured stages of funeral rites are critically assessed in relation to Catholic teaching. While some elements may be considered neutral or open to inculturation, others risk religious syncretism and thus require theological discernment grounded in church doctrine.

Building on this analysis, the article advances towards contemporary theological reflection that promotes a constructive dialogue between Catholic faith and local culture. Inculturation is understood not as a compromise of faith but as a dynamic process through which the gospel can take root in cultural expressions without losing its essence, calling the church to be both contextually present and doctrinally faithful (Fernández 2025; Painadath 2023). Accordingly, *Rambu Solo'* is approached with neither outright rejection nor uncritical acceptance, but through critical–theological discernment that allows for partial or contextual integration within the faith life of Torajan Catholics (Tanggulungan 2022), thus offering a balanced path between faith and culture.

Framework theory

Liturgical theology in the Catholic church

To assess the theological limits and possibilities of integrating *Rambu Solo'* within Catholic faith, this study draws on liturgical theology as a normative framework for evaluating religious practices related to death and communal worship. Liturgical theology examines the meaning, structure, and function of the liturgy in the life of the church, which in the Catholic tradition is understood not merely as a collection of rituals but also as a living and saving celebration through which the People of God participate in the saving work of Christ (Benini 2024). As the church's sacred and public action, the liturgy both glorifies God and sanctifies humanity, making present the mysteries of faith, especially the Paschal Mystery of Christ (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7; Benini 2024; Streza 2021).

A foundational principle of Catholic liturgical theology is *lex orandi, lex credenda* – the law of prayer is the law of belief – indicating that authentic liturgical practice necessarily reflects and safeguards the church's faith (Aniol 2021; Elizabeth 2015). Consequently, no liturgical or quasi-liturgical practice can contradict Catholic doctrine, and the liturgy functions as a primary means of transmitting and forming faith within the community. From this perspective, local traditions, devotional practices, and ritual expressions – such as those found in *Rambu Solo'* – must be critically evaluated in light of their coherence with the faith celebrated in the church's official liturgy (Murphy 2014).

In this context, the practice of *Rambu Solo'* as a form of devotion or religious tradition within certain Catholic communities needs to be analysed in the light of authentic Catholic liturgical principles. To frame *Rambu Solo'* as a religious tradition in a broader theoretical sense, this study situates it in dialogue with Catholic spirituality and universal or world spiritualities, both of which seek to respond to fundamental human questions concerning death, meaning, and transcendence, though with distinct theological orientations. Within Catholic spirituality, a religious tradition is considered authentic insofar as it directs the faithful towards participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ and remains grounded in ecclesial communion and sacramental life, whereas other spiritual traditions may emphasise communal memory, ancestral continuity, or symbolic mediation without reference to Christological salvation.

From this perspective, *Rambu Solo'* may be understood as fulfilling certain criteria of a religious tradition – such as ritual continuity, symbolic expression, and communal formation – while still requiring critical-theological discernment regarding its compatibility with Catholic liturgical structure and doctrine. Thus, the evaluation of such practices must consider fidelity to the apostolic tradition, unity with the universal church, and the capacity of liturgy to shape the spiritual life of the faithful authentically (Baloyi 2014; Pantan et al. 2024). In line with church teaching, local liturgical expressions may be permitted insofar as they remain coherent

with Catholic doctrine and official rites (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 37–40; Driscoll 2017; Fernández 2025; Painadath 2023; Parenti 2020), underscoring the necessary balance between pastoral openness and doctrinal integrity.

Inculturation as a contextual–theological approach

Inculturation is one of the most important models in contemporary Catholic theology, especially in the context of mission and evangelisation amid cultural diversity. In theological terms, inculturation refers to a dynamic process in which the gospel is lived, translated, and deeply rooted in a particular culture without losing the substance of the Christian faith (Basas 2020; Okunade 2022). This process is dialogical rather than one-directional: the gospel transforms culture, while cultural contexts shape concrete expressions of faith. In this sense, inculturation resonates with Bevans' contextual models of theology, which emphasise the interaction between Christian faith and specific cultural, social, and historical realities (Ballano 2020; Basas 2020; Bevans 2005).

The Catholic Church has officially affirmed the importance of inculturation since the Second Vatican Council, which opened a space for local expressions of faith in accordance with cultural contexts (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 37–40; *Ad Gentes*, 22). Pope John Paul II, in *Ecclesia in Asia*, described inculturation as the permeation of culture with the gospel and the integration of cultural values compatible with Christian life. At the same time, inculturation requires theological discernment to avoid syncretism, remaining Christ-centred, ecclesially grounded, and faithful to the church's teaching authority (Basas 2020; Commission 1989; Doyle 2012).

In relation to the practice of *Rambu Solo'*, the inculturation approach provides a relevant and profound framework of reflection. *Rambu Solo'* is rooted in local cultural traditions that, over time, have entered into a lived interaction with Catholic faith through pastoral presence, catechesis, and participation of Catholic communities in funeral rituals (Payong 2022; Peprah 2024). This interaction reflects a complex relationship in which certain cultural expressions function as social and symbolic vehicles for communal solidarity and remembrance of the dead, while at the same time raising theological questions regarding their compatibility with Catholic beliefs and liturgical norms.

Accordingly, this study examines whether *Rambu Solo'* can be understood as an authentic form of inculturation, namely as a practice in which cultural elements are gradually transformed by the gospel, or whether it still preserves beliefs and ritual meanings that stand in tension with Catholic teaching. Authentic inculturation requires that cultural values be not only accommodated but also purified and reshaped by the gospel (Nyuyki & Niekerk 2016), and thus the relationship between *Rambu Solo'* and Catholicism must be evaluated through historical-cultural analysis, theological discernment, and ecclesial criteria. In this way, the study

highlights a relationship marked neither by simple rejection nor uncritical acceptance but also by an ongoing process of dialogue aimed at safeguarding the integrity of faith while engaging local culture pastorally.

Contextual theology and the challenges of local culture

Contextual theology is a theological approach that emerged as a response to the awareness that theology cannot be separated from the socio-cultural context in which faith is lived. In this approach, the Christian faith is understood not merely as a collection of universal and static core beliefs but also as a living reality that must be interpreted and expressed within the concrete situations of believers (Gill 2021; Mikulášek 2022). Context – whether historical, cultural, economic, or the life experiences of the community – becomes the field of interpretation where God’s revelation and human life meet and engage in dialogue (Anthony 2023). Therefore, contextual theology rejects the ‘one model fits all’ approach and instead emphasises that every faith community must formulate theological reflections that speak directly to the realities and challenges they face.

In this context, the practice of *Rambu Solo’* can be seen as a form of local faith expression arising from the struggle of the faithful to live out their Catholic identity within the distinctive Torajan cultural framework. The emergence of this practice reflects the community’s desire to respond to spiritual, social, and perhaps even psychological needs in ways rooted in their cultural setting (Harwanto 2020; Pantan 2024; Tangdialla et al. 2024). Contextual theology invites us to view such phenomena not with initial suspicion but with openness to interpretation: how are the faithful attempting to interpret the gospel in their daily lives? Nevertheless, this approach also involves an important theological tension. Contextualisation must never compromise the integrity of faith doctrine (Barber 2020; Okunade 2022). Therefore, every local practice that arises from contextual struggles must be tested through valid theological criteria: does the practice lead believers to Christ, deepen their understanding of the mystery of faith, and strengthen their unity with the universal church?

Rambu Solo’, in this regard, needs to be studied not only as a cultural practice but also as a theological act with implications for faith understanding, devotional structures, and the Catholic identity of the community (Pasi 2021). Within a contextual–theological perspective, the relationship between cultural practice and theology is understood as a reciprocal yet critical interaction: culture provides concrete forms through which faith is expressed, while theology offers normative criteria to discern, purify, and transform cultural meanings in the light of the gospel. Thus, the central question is whether *Rambu Solo’* deepens Catholic spirituality in the local context or obscures the Christological and ecclesiological dimensions of faith.

Accordingly, an interdisciplinary approach combining theological, anthropological, and pastoral reflection enables

this study to examine *Rambu Solo’* as a potential site of evangelisation rather than merely a cultural challenge. Contextual theology recognises that faith must be continually lived and interpreted within concrete realities, yet always with caution so that cultural expressions remain rooted in divine revelation and church teaching, becoming an authentic means of making Christ present within an evolving local culture.

Research methods and design

This study uses a qualitative approach with an interdisciplinary design that combines cultural anthropological analysis and theological reflection (De Beer, Smith & Manyaka 2017; Szymczak 2020). The main data were obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted directly and verbally with informants who were actively involved in the practice of *Rambu Solo’* and Catholic life in Toraja. The interviews aimed to explore life experiences, religious understanding, and the symbolic meaning of *Rambu Solo’* in relation to Catholic faith, devotion, and liturgical practices (eds. Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). All interviews were transcribed in writing to ensure accuracy of analysis and enable systematic data reading (Ward & Tveitereid 2022).

The selection of informants was conducted purposively, taking into account their competence, experience, and authority in the fields of pastoral care, liturgy, and Toraja culture. The informants consisted of Catholic clergy and lay people who had in-depth knowledge and direct experience related to *Rambu Solo’*. The interview data were analysed thematically and interpreted in dialogue with anthropological literature and Catholic theological sources, including the church’s official teachings on liturgy, death, and inculturation. Through this process, this study seeks to critically assess the practice of *Rambu Solo’* as a religious–cultural practice, weighing the potential for authentic inculturation as well as the theological boundaries that must be maintained for the integrity of the Catholic faith.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Sekolah Tinggi Kateketik dan Pastoral Rantepao (No. S.Pen-Kev.04-2024/03).

Results and discussion

Characteristics of the *Rambu Solo’* practice

Rambu Solo’ is one of the most complex and sacred death rituals within the religious life of the Toraja people in South Sulawesi. This ritual is not merely a series of funeral ceremonies but rather a spiritual and social centre that reflects the Torajan worldview concerning death, ancestral spirits, and the interconnectedness between the human and the spirit world (Hasbi et al. 2019c; Pantan et al. 2024). In traditional Torajan belief, governed by the *Aluk Todolo* system (literally meaning ‘the way of the ancestors’), life does not end with death; instead, death is regarded as a transitional process from the human realm (the temporary world) to

Puya, the spiritual realm where the soul continues its existence (Wikandatu et al. 2022).

The *Rambu Solo'* ritual involves several phases prior to the burial. The first phase is *Ma'karudusan*, in which two buffaloes are sacrificed. The next phase is *Ma'pasa'tedong*, during which all buffaloes designated as offerings are gathered in the courtyard of the *tongkonan* [ancestral house] where the body lies in state, and then paraded around the *bala'kaan* three times. On the following day, the body is transferred from the *tongkonan* to the rice barn. After the *Ma'pasonglo* ceremony, the body is moved once again to the *lakkian*, a site near the burial ground. Each transfer is accompanied by a procession. The climax of the ceremony is marked by the slaughter of all the buffaloes to be sacrificed, which are then distributed in accordance with customary law.

Beyond its function as a traditional ceremony, *Rambu Solo'* serves as a declaration of collective identity, a reinforcement of kinship bonds, and a means of preserving Torajan social structure. The deceased's family is obliged to perform this ritual as the highest form of respect for the ancestors, while also affirming the family's social position within the customary community. Consequently, *Rambu Solo'* carries not only spiritual significance but also social and economic dimensions. In this sense, the death ritual becomes an event that fully integrates both the sacred and the profane.

From the perspective of spirituality, *Rambu Solo'* reflects a worldview in which ancestors occupy a central role in shaping meaning, identity, and moral orientation within Torajan life. Spirituality in this context refers not merely to personal belief but also to a lived and communal orientation towards transcendence that is expressed through ritual practices, symbolic communication, and ethical relationships between the living and the deceased. Ancestors are thus perceived as continuing participants in human life, a belief manifested through offerings, prayers, and ritual mediation.

Within contextual theology, this form of spirituality must be critically examined in dialogue with the Christian faith, which understands spirituality as fundamentally Christ-centred and oriented towards salvation through Christ alone. The theological question, therefore, concerns whether the ancestral spirituality embedded in *Rambu Solo'* can be reinterpreted in a way that coheres with Catholic doctrines of salvation, mediation, and communion of saints, or whether it introduces tensions that require theological discernment and critical re-interpretation.

From a theological standpoint, the practice of *Rambu Solo'* embodies noble values such as reverence for life, respect for parents, and an awareness of the interconnectedness between the present life and the afterlife. Nevertheless, its underlying belief system implies an independent saving structure and spiritual worldview that are not always in harmony with the framework related to the Christ of Catholic theology (Agadá & Ikuli 2024). In many cases, *Rambu Solo'* places ancestral spirits as active spiritual agents capable of

influencing earthly life – a position explicitly unsupported by Catholic teaching.

Thus, the characteristics of *Rambu Solo'* reflect a holistic expression of faith and culture in the life of the Toraja people, rich in both anthropological and theological values. A deep and objective understanding of this practice is essential not only to appreciate the richness of local culture but also to assess the extent to which inculturation can take place in a healthy and theologically sound manner. This approach becomes particularly relevant in the context of the Catholic Church in Indonesia, which exists amid cultural and religious diversity and faces the challenge of integrating faith values with local wisdom without compromising doctrinal integrity.

Based on interviews with several respondents, *Rambu Solo'* is understood as a final act of respect for the deceased: a procession escorting the body from the home to the grave, and a means of strengthening social bonds within the extended family and the broader community. Respondent 1 noted that the practice embodies a spirit of mutual cooperation and togetherness, evident in both preparation and execution, reflecting the strong social solidarity of the Toraja people. At the same time, *Rambu Solo'* functions as a social mechanism that reinforces social unity and affirms kinship and social structures based on levels.

A distinctive feature of the ritual is the sacrifice of animals, particularly buffaloes and pigs. Within the *Aluk Todolo* tradition, these animals are believed to serve as provisions or vehicles for the spirit's journey to *Puya*. The number and type of animals sacrificed not only symbolise love and respect for the deceased but also reflect the social status of the family. In fact, interviews revealed that many families are willing to incur debt in order to hold elaborate ceremonies, both to maintain social prestige and to 'repay ritual debts' owed to families of previously deceased relatives.

Nevertheless, the practice of *Rambu Solo'* is not uniform. Respondent 2 from the Gandangbatu Sillanan region stated that in their area, the ritual is conducted in a simpler form compared to northern Toraja. This variation indicates a degree of flexibility in practice, shaped by socio-economic conditions and cultural locality.

In addition, *Rambu Solo'* carries strong spiritual and emotional dimensions that reflect a particular form of communal spirituality rooted in Torajan culture. The spiritual rituals performed – such as prayers for the deceased, consolation for the bereaved, expressions of grief, and remembrance – embody a lived spirituality oriented towards solidarity, compassion, and shared responsibility within the community. This spirituality is closely intertwined with cultural values, as seen in communal participation and the distribution of sacrificial meat, which symbolises mutual care and social cohesion.

However, this cultural-spiritual interplay is not static. Social change has introduced practices that risk shifting the ritual's

spiritual orientation, such as the display of wealth, social competition, and activities like gambling or ritualised contests involving animals, which respondents identify as departures from the original spiritual intent of *Rambu Solo'*. From a Catholic perspective, these developments raise questions about how such forms of spirituality relate to Catholic spirituality, which is Christ-centred and oriented towards salvation, compassion, and communion rather than prestige or competition.

Thus, *Rambu Solo'* may be understood as a complex symbolic system in which spiritual, cultural, and social values converge. It functions both as a medium for honouring the dead and as a space for transmitting cultural meaning across generations, grounded in a Torajan cosmology that views human life as relational – among the living, the ancestors, and the spiritual realm. Within this framework, death is perceived as a transitional passage, and *Rambu Solo'* becomes a ritual site where cultural spirituality encounters theological discernment in dialogue with Catholic faith.

Theological challenges from the Catholic perspective

From the perspective of Catholic theology, death is not merely a biological event but also a crucial point in the spiritual journey of humanity towards eternity. The Catholic Church teaches that at the moment of death, the human soul undergoes a particular judgement that determines the eternal destiny of the soul: heaven, hell, or purification in purgatorial fire (CCC 1021–1022) (Danquah 2023; Mercurio 2021). In this doctrine, salvation is personal and transcendent, realised through a direct relationship between human beings and God in Christ. Christ himself is affirmed as the sole mediator between God and humanity (cf. 1 Tim 2:5), and all saving grace flows from his unique and definitive saving work (Paas 2022).

In light of this doctrine, significant theological challenges emerge when considering the practice of *Rambu Solo'*, a traditional Torajan funeral rite rich in spiritual symbolism and ancestral veneration (Wikandatu et al. 2022). In this study, the term *theological* is used not to suggest that *Rambu Solo'* is itself a formal theological system but to indicate that the practice embodies implicit beliefs about death, the afterlife, mediation, and the relationship between the living and the spiritual realm, which invite theological evaluation. Within this tradition, ancestors are understood as continuing to influence human life and as being ritually acknowledged through offerings and symbolic actions aimed at securing peace for the deceased. It is at this level of meaning and belief that the theological analysis is undertaken.

In the Catholic faith, although there is the doctrine of the communion of saints – the spiritual bond among the church on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven – this relationship is always situated within a Christ-centred and sacrament-based framework (Appiah-Kubi 2020). Prayers for the souls in purgatory, for instance, are understood as an expression of love within the mystical body of Christ, not as an effort to

'provide supplies' or 'satisfy' the desires of spirits as understood in non-Christian spiritual traditions (Crozier 2022; Schlesinger 2024). When Catholics begin to practise rituals or devotions that assume that ancestors possess active spiritual power over the living, a tension arises between Christian faith and indigenous beliefs. If left without proper religious instruction, such practices may lead to a form of syncretism – a blending of Catholic theology with elements of spirit worship or multiple deities – that contradicts Christian revelation (Mercurio 2021; Yeboah, Owusu & Obimpeh-Quayson 2024).

Syncretism represents a serious challenge in the context of inculturation, as it risks undermining the integrity of the faith. The church's teaching is explicit in rejecting magical practices, communication with the dead, or any form of spiritual communication that suggests the existence of a saving authority apart from Christ (cf. CCC 2116–2117) (Phan 2022). In this context, *Rambu Solo'* is examined theologically as a form of cultural spirituality that expresses Torajan understandings of death and ancestral presence. In this study, spirituality refers to lived religious meaning within a cultural context rather than a formal theological system. From this perspective, the analysis does not equate *Rambu Solo'* with Catholic theology, but evaluates whether its spiritual meanings can be purified and reoriented in the light of Christian faith or risk functioning as a parallel devotion that diminishes the centrality of Christ as the sole mediator of salvation.

Catholic theologians engaged in the field of inculturation, such as Robert Schreier and Stephen Bevans, emphasise that genuine inculturation requires the filtering and purification of local cultural elements in the light of the gospel (Basas 2020; Bevans 2019). This view implies that not all cultural elements can be immediately integrated into the Catholic faith and practice without careful theological evaluation. Such a process demands clear criteria, especially in relation to the understanding of Christ, the church, and the sacraments.

In the context of *Rambu Solo'*, this challenge becomes particularly evident because the practice carries symbolic meanings that express a form of cultural spirituality, which must be critically evaluated in the light of Catholic theological principles rather than being assumed to correspond directly to Catholic spirituality. The question that arises is who truly plays the role in the work of human salvation and how is the relationship between the visible and the invisible world to be understood in the light of faith. Thus, the theological discussion on *Rambu Solo'* is not merely about cultural preservation but also about the harmony of faith and the teachings of the church in facing the dynamics of local cultural diversity.

Therefore, the main theological challenge in engaging the practice of *Rambu Solo'* lies in safeguarding the purity of Catholic doctrine amid a powerful socio-cultural reality, while discerning between spiritual belief systems that may

conflict with the gospel and the noble values, such as solidarity, compassion, and communal responsibility, that can be critically received and integrated within Christian faith. The church is called to carry out the sanctification of culture, not mere cultural assimilation (Ballano 2020; Basas 2020). For this reason, appropriate spiritual guidance and instructional approaches are needed so that the faithful may clearly understand the distinction between honouring ancestors in the light of Catholic faith and traditional beliefs that stand in contradiction to the Christian profession of faith.

As Respondent 1 expressed, there is concern regarding certain practices in *Rambu Solo'* that contradict the baptismal promises, such as belief in the power of sacrificial animals, gambling, and unhealthy forms of entertainment. Respondent 1 also emphasised that the guarantee of salvation in Catholic teaching is faith in Jesus Christ as Redeemer, not through sacrificial animals such as buffalo. This opinion highlights the fundamental difference between the Catholic system of belief and some traditional ritual elements still present in the implementation of *Rambu Solo'*.

However, not all respondents perceived a principled contradiction. Respondent 2 stated that there is no Catholic teaching that directly opposes the practice of *Rambu Solo'*, and that the real challenge lies in the superficial understanding of the true meaning of the rite itself. For him, many noble values in *Rambu Solo'*, such as solidarity, kinship, and communal cooperation, are in harmony with gospel values. The real challenge lies in how to interpret symbols and actions deeply so as not to fall into empty formalism or even theological deviation.

Furthermore, Respondent 3 emphasised that they actually see *Rambu Solo'* as an entry point for Catholic teaching among the traditional Torajan community. He connected the practice of honouring ancestors in *Rambu Solo'* with the doctrine of the communion of saints. In the Creed, Catholics profess the existence of a spiritual relationship between those who are still living, those who are being purified, and those who are already rejoicing in heavenly glory. According to him, this concept bears a cultural closeness to the practice of ancestor veneration in Toraja and can serve as a basis for building a theological bridge between the Catholic faith and local tradition.

The church itself has paved the way for such an approach through the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasised the importance of cultural dialogue in the proclamation of the gospel. In *Gaudium et Spes*, it is stated that '[t]he church values whatever is true, good, and holy in various cultures' (GS 58) (Basas 2020). Furthermore, in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI stressed that 'The gospel must not only be proclaimed but also inculturated into culture' (EN 20). Similarly, Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* declared that 'Inculturation is a lengthy and patient process ... but it is absolutely necessary' (RM 52) (Ballano 2020).

Thus, inculturation becomes the key to addressing this challenge. Inculturation is different from syncretism: it is not a mere mixing of teachings, but rather the integration of gospel values into the structures of local culture, while maintaining the purity of faith. Respondent 3 affirmed that the word inculturation is most fitting, because the Catholic faith must remain the core that illuminates the interpretation of local culture.

The theological challenge faced by Torajan Catholics is not a black-and-white issue between faith and custom but a dynamic dialogue between two identities: as heirs of ancestral tradition and as believers in Christ. Therefore, the church's spiritual guidance approach must be empathetic, educative, and dialogical (Hasbi et al. 2019a; Sanggalangi & Koodoh 2023). It is tasked not only with safeguarding correct belief but also with guiding the faithful to understand and live out their faith within a cultural context that is alive and continually developing.

Efforts towards harmonisation: Moving towards an inclusive, context-specific theology

In reflecting on the dialogue between cultural values and Christian faith, it is necessary to emphasise the fundamental difference between universal spirituality and Christian spirituality by situating both within their respective belief systems concerning life and death. In the Torajan worldview, death is not understood as an immediate rupture but as a transitional process in which the deceased continues to exist in relational proximity to the living community. The body retains symbolic and social significance, while the soul is believed to journey towards the realm of the ancestors, who continue to play an active role in the well-being and moral order of the living. Universal spirituality, as expressed in practices such as *Rambu Solo'*, is therefore grounded in ethical-anthropological values – solidarity, respect for life, compassion, and communal responsibility – that emerge from collective religious experience and are mediated through rituals honouring the dead and the ancestors.

Meanwhile, Christian spirituality is not primarily derived from human religious experience but is rooted in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, particularly in his death and resurrection. Catholic theology affirms the unity and dignity of body and soul, understands death as a passage towards definitive communion with God, and proclaims the resurrection of the body as participation in Christ's Paschal Mystery (Norman 2021). Unlike the Torajan belief in the continuing mediatory role of ancestors, Christianity confesses Christ as the sole mediator of salvation between God and humanity (Kaethler 2024; Magezi & Magezi 2017). Therefore, similarities at the level of moral values or communal expressions of mourning do not necessarily imply theological equivalence, especially concerning salvation, mediation, and the ultimate destiny of the human person.

Based on this distinction, the dialogue between *Rambu Solo'* and the Catholic faith in this study is not interpreted as an

attempt to equate or combine two different spiritual systems but rather as a reflective process of assessing, purifying, and interpreting cultural values in the light of the gospel (Basas 2020). The inculturation approach consciously rejects syncretism, which is the mixing of non-Christian elements with Catholic teachings that can obscure the uniqueness of Christ's revelation and Christ's role as the centre of salvation. Cultural dialogue is directed not towards the creation of a new spiritual identity but towards efforts to transform and critically integrate universal values into the life of the church without losing the integrity of the Christian faith.

In response to the tension between culture and faith, a number of thinkers and pastoral practitioners emphasise the importance of applying contextual theology that does not oppose local culture but rather seeks to dialogue with and integrate cultural values that are in harmony with the gospel (Gill 2021; Okunade 2022). Within this framework, inculturation becomes a key concept – namely, the process by which gospel values are lived, interpreted, and embodied within a particular cultural context without diminishing the purity of divine revelation (Ballano 2020; Basas 2020). This approach requires openness to local wisdom while maintaining fidelity to Catholic teaching, so that the church may be present authentically amid cultural diversity (Bevans 2019).

In the context of Tana Toraja, the results of the research interviews reveal a growing awareness of the importance of open dialogue between the *Rambu Solo'* tradition and Catholic teaching. This dialogue is seen not only as possible but also as necessary and urgent. Respondent 1 affirmed that dialogue between *Rambu Solo'* and Catholic teaching must always be pursued, stressing the need for the church to grasp the essence of *Rambu Solo'* while distinguishing it from elements that often overshadow its noble values, such as gambling and family prestige. Therefore, a theological and spiritual guidance approach that is both selective and inclusive is required, so that noble values such as solidarity, compassion, and kinship may be accommodated and at the same time transformed in the light of the gospel.

The idea of inculturation has already taken shape in several concrete practices initiated by the local church. For example, Respondent 2 explained that during the implementation of *Rambu Solo'*, the Requiem Mass or Funeral Mass is now often celebrated at the mourning house or courtyard, in harmony with the structure of the local customary ceremony. In addition, cultural symbols such as *tombi* (traditional flags) have also been adapted and reinterpreted in a Christian manner, for instance, by adding the symbol of the cross and using particular ceremonial colours. This step demonstrates a process of reinterpreting the symbols of local culture in the light of the Catholic faith.

Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of the church's active presence in the *Rambu Solo'* ceremonies. Respondent 1 suggested that parish lay leaders and station coordinators should receive special religious instruction on the relationship between culture and faith so that they may

serve as bridges of dialogue among the faithful. In this context, contextual religious instruction becomes an essential instrument to prevent the reduction of faith into mere formal rituals, while also ensuring that tradition does not lose its spiritual orientation.

The interviews also revealed a transformation of cultural expressions through the integration of local symbols and language into the practice of faith. For example, Respondent 3 noted that prayers and *badong* chants (traditional laments) have begun to be infused with scriptural values and Christian theology. Similarly, the use of the local language in Mass and funeral prayers has become a means of uniting faith and culture. This activity demonstrates that the process of inculturation does not merely preserve the forms of cultural expression but also integrates gospel meanings and values within them.

Nevertheless, some respondents acknowledged that this process of inculturation still requires further deepening. Respondent 1 stated that for the practice of *Rambu Solo'* specifically, they have not yet seen that the results are optimal, while affirming the belief that *Rambu Solo'* could become an avenue for Catholic religious instruction if attributes that obscure its essential values can be set aside. This opinion underscores that inculturation is not an instant process but rather a long journey demanding commitment, reflection, and openness from various parties.

In addition, the findings highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration in advancing this effort of inculturation. Several respondents emphasised the importance of involving cultural experts, theologians, sociologists, and customary leaders in developing a comprehensive understanding and spiritual guidance approach to the practice of *Rambu Solo'* (Respondent 2). This approach is in line with the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes* and *Redemptoris Missio*, which call the church to embrace cultural richness as a way of recognising and proclaiming God's grace in human life.

In light of these findings, it becomes evident that the local church is beginning to move from a passive or confrontational stance towards a role as an agent of dialogue and renewal. The church's role is not limited to safeguarding doctrinal purity but also extends to facilitating an authentic and rooted local spirituality. Thus, inculturation is not understood as a compromise of faith but as an effort to spread the gospel in a specific cultural context, wherein the gospel truly becomes a light for all nations without negating the cultural identity of the faithful (Basas 2020; Pabebang et al. 2022).

Conclusion

The practice of *Rambu Solo'* in Toraja society is a death ritual rich in spiritual, social, and cultural meaning, reflecting the Torajan worldview on death, the body, the soul, and the relationship between the human world and the spiritual realm. In this worldview, death is not understood as an abrupt end of life but as a transitional phase towards continued existence in the realm of the ancestors, where the

soul remains connected to the living community. The body retains social and symbolic significance even after death, as funeral rites affirm the dignity of the deceased and facilitate the soul's proper passage. This ceremony, therefore, functions not merely as a customary tradition but also as a theological and cosmological expression that affirms collective identity, strengthens social bonds, and preserves a kinship-based and socially stratified order. Within this framework, ancestors are perceived as active and influential figures whose presence shapes the moral and spiritual life of the community, revealing a reciprocal relationship between the living and the ancestral world, which is central to Torajan spirituality.

From the perspective of Catholic theology, the practice of *Rambu Solo'* presents real theological challenges, particularly regarding the belief in ancestors as spiritual agents who require sacrificial offerings for peace. This understanding does not fully align with Catholic doctrine, which affirms Christ as the sole mediator of salvation. Such differences carry the risk of theological tension and syncretism if animistic elements are incorporated without proper discernment. For this reason, the church is called to purify the faith while at the same time recognising and respecting the noble values present in local tradition, so that doctrinal integrity is preserved.

At the same time, this study finds that not all elements of *Rambu Solo'* stand in opposition to Catholic teaching. Values such as solidarity, kinship, and communal responsibility resonate deeply with gospel values and provide a genuine opening for dialogue and inculturation, understood as the integration of gospel values into local culture without compromising the essence of faith. When approached critically and pastorally, *Rambu Solo'* can become an entry point for deepening the lived experience of faith within Torajan society.

The harmonisation of customary practices and Catholic faith, therefore, requires a dialogical and context-sensitive theological approach. Through selective inculturation, the local church can reinterpret cultural symbols and rituals so that they express Christian meaning while remaining rooted in Torajan cultural identity. This process demands the collaboration of theologians, cultural experts, and customary leaders, supported by contextual catechesis and spiritual guidance to help the faithful understand and live the tradition authentically.

Ultimately, the engagement between *Rambu Solo'* and Catholic teaching is not a simple opposition but an ongoing process of dialogue, discernment, and transformation. The church is called not only to safeguard doctrinal truth but also to accompany the faithful in integrating their cultural heritage with Christian faith. In this way, inculturation emerges not as a compromise of belief but as a concrete and contextual proclamation of the gospel within the cultural richness of Torajan society.

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CRedit authorship contribution

Patrio Tandianga: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Frans F. Palinoan: Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Carolus Patampang: Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to reasons of sensitivity and are available from the corresponding author, Patrio Tandianga, upon reasonable request.

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