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Christ and the Toraja mediator: A critical assessment of *Era di Langi'* and *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*

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This article examines, within a comparative framework, the concepts of *Era di Langi'* and *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* in *Aluk To Dolo* in relation to the Christology of John 14:6. Employing a comparative theological approach, this study analyses the cosmological and soteriological structures of *Aluk To Dolo* as well as the mediatory functions of these two concepts in connection with Jesus' claim to be 'the way, and the truth, and the life'. An exegetical investigation of John 14:6 suggests that, within the Johannine theological framework, access to the Father is portrayed as mediated through the person and work of Christ, whose nature is presented as divine and whose mission carries soteriological and eschatological significance. The findings indicate a functional point of contact – namely, the human need for a mediator between the earthly and the divine realms – while also highlighting fundamental differences in ontological status, epistemological grounding and soteriological scope. Accordingly, *Era di Langi'* and *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* are not treated as ontological equivalents to Christ within their respective systems. This study further argues that, although these *Aluk To Dolo* concepts may serve as contextual analogies in communicating the Gospel, their use requires a critical and non-syncretistic hermeneutical framework that takes into account the distinctive and exclusivist claims associated with Johannine Christology.

Contribution: This research offers a rigorous comparative framework for evaluating functional parallels – without conflating natures – between the cosmological mediators of *Aluk To Dolo* and the Christology of John 14:6, thereby enriching critical and non-syncretistic efforts of Gospel contextualisation in Toraja.

Keywords: *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*; *Era di Langi'*; *Aluk To Dolo*; Christ; mediator; Saviour.

Introduction

Aluk To Dolo is the indigenous religion of the Toraja people who inhabit the mountainous regions of northern South Sulawesi. Etymologically, *aluk* means 'rule' or 'religion', *to* means 'people', and *dolo* means 'ancestors', so *Aluk To Dolo* may be understood as the 'religion of the ancestors' or the 'ancient religion' (Kombongkila, Buntu & Wijanarko 2023:88). The term is rooted in the Torajan tradition in which offerings are consistently presented to the ancestors in every ritual and customary activity – a practice known as 'feeding the ancestors' [*ma'todolo or ma'pakande to matua*] (Tangdilintin 1980:72). This religion is also frequently referred to as *Alukta* [our religion], with the suffix *-ta* [our] highlighting the inclusive character of the community (Sandarupa 2015:86). Initially, *Aluk To Dolo* did not receive official state recognition because it was categorised as a form of animism. However, since 1969, the government has recognised *Aluk To Dolo* as one of the branches of Hindu Dharma (Haryono & Attilovita 2021:62).

Within the Torajan religious worldview, several distinctive theological concepts emerge; among them are *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* – a figure understood as a heavenly envoy – and *Era di Langi'*, regarded as the 'ladder of heaven' functioning as a connector between humans and *Puang Matua* [the Creator]. These two concepts form the centre of soteriology in *Aluk To Dolo* and therefore warrant in-depth theological examination. Haryono and Attilovita (2021:63) observe that the structure of salvation in *Aluk To Dolo* exhibits certain points of similarity with biblical soteriology, particularly in relation to the concept of Jesus Christ as God's envoy and the way to the Father (Jn 14:6). These findings open promising pathways for constructive contextual theology, while simultaneously demanding caution to avoid syncretism.

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Syncretism itself has become a tangible theological issue among some Torajan Christians. Pradika (2018:56) notes that many Christian adherents continue to practise customs grounded in *Aluk To Dolo*, because the system has become deeply embedded as an inseparable component of Torajan cultural identity. This situation requires an academic inquiry that is not merely descriptive, but also analytical and comparative, in order to assess more objectively how the concepts of *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* and *Era di Langi'* may be situated within a theological dialogue with New Testament soteriology.

Despite these previous studies, a critical comparative theological analysis that examines the soteriological structures of *Aluk To Dolo* in direct dialogue with the Johannine understanding of Jesus as 'the way' (Jn 14:6) remains underexplored. Existing discussions tend either to describe the indigenous system or to draw superficial parallels without sufficiently addressing the theological distinctions at the levels of ontology and soteriology. Therefore, this study aims to provide a more rigorous comparative theological analysis of the concepts of *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* and *Era di Langi'* in relation to the Johannine Christological claim, with particular attention to their implications for contextual theology in Toraja.

Research methods and design

To address this issue methodologically, this study employs a comparative theological approach (Clooney 2010:11), which allows both belief systems to be read in dialogue without conflating their identities. The comparison is conducted primarily at the functional and soteriological levels, while also taking into account the narrative and theological structures that shape each tradition.

This approach is carried out in three primary steps. Firstly, an exegetical study of John 14:6 (Porter & Clarke 2002:7) is undertaken alongside an analysis of the concepts of *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* and *Era di Langi'*, including an exploration of their theological meanings, narrative structures and soteriological functions within the framework of *Aluk To Dolo*. Secondly, a comparative analysis is conducted to identify points of convergence and divergence between the two systems, whether in theological motifs, structures of salvation or understandings of the heavenly mediator. Thirdly, the study provides an evaluation of the soteriological implications of this dialogue, with the aim of establishing a stronger foundation for meaningful Gospel contextualisation (DeVries 2021:3; Goheen 2014:4) while also preventing uncritical syncretism. In this respect, the research adopts a dialogical theological posture, seeking to understand the indigenous concepts within their own religious framework while engaging them critically from a Christian theological perspective.

In line with this approach, this study is situated within the field of comparative theology. It does not seek to evaluate religious traditions from a neutral or purely descriptive standpoint, nor does it function as a strictly confessional or apologetic work. Rather, it engages in a dialogical and analytical comparison between *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi' and Era di Langi'* and the Johannine Christological framework of John 14:6, while remaining self-aware of its location within Christian theological reflection. This positioning allows the study to identify both points of contact and fundamental differences without collapsing the distinct theological structures of each tradition.

By employing this methodological framework, the research aims to offer a rigorous comparative analysis (Kristanto, F., Purnomo, S. & Laia 2025:2) that contributes both to academic discussions on interreligious theology and to the development of responsible contextual theology in the Indonesian setting.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Commission of the Evangelical Theological Seminary of Indonesia (No. 00417/KEP-STTII Sby/EC/XII/2025).

Results and discussion

The significance of *Era di Langi'* in the *Aluk To Dolo* belief system

Within the *Aluk To Dolo* belief system, *Puang Matua* is understood as the Supreme Creator God who brings the entire cosmic reality into existence along with the normative order that regulates human life (Zijlstra 1927:166–168). In Torajan cosmogonic belief, human beings are regarded as creations of *Puang Matua*, formed from pure gold together with seven other primordial beings. Of these creations, only one takes on human form – *Datu Laukku'* (or *Datu Baine*) – who is viewed as the ancestor of humankind. The other seven primordial beings became the origins of various elements of nature: *Allau Tiranda* [the ipuh tree], *Laungku* [cotton], *Pong Pirikpirik* [rain], *Menturiri* [chicken], *Menturini* [water buffalo], *Riako'* [iron] and *Takkebuku* [rice] (Liku-Ada' 2014:81–83).

Puang Matua is not only positioned as the source of all that exists, but also as the giver of *aluk* [religious law], which encompasses ritual order [*lettenan aluk*] and various religious prohibitions [*pemali*] that function as ethical and spiritual guidelines for humanity (Liku-Ada' 2014:14). Humans are believed to have been originally created in the heavens, after heaven and earth were first created and united as a single cosmic structure (Van deer Veen 1976:132).

The descent of humans from heaven to earth took place through the *Era di Langi'*, which, in *Aluk To Dolo* mythology, is portrayed as a stone ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Through this heavenly ladder, humans descended into the world while carrying with them the religious laws and *pemali* entrusted directly by *Puang Matua* (Salombe' 1972:53). In a highly revered myth, the first human to descend is claimed as the common ancestor of the Torajan people (Tolan 2016:29).

In this primordial phase, the relationship between *Puang Matua* and His creation – especially humanity – is described as direct, harmonious and unbroken (Saleda et al. 2024:115).

In several oral traditions, *Era di Langi'* functions as a vertical medium of communication between the human world and the divine realm. Through this ladder, humans could ascend to consult *Puang Matua* regarding ritual procedures, the interpretation of *aluk* and various existential issues. In other mythic variants, *Era di Langi'* is even described as the channel by which humans obtained fire from the presence of *Puang Matua* (Saleda et al. 2024:115). Thus, *Era di Langi'* is not merely a spatial connector between heaven and earth but also a symbol of the ontological and communicative relationship between the divine and the human.

A rupture in this relationship occurred because of a major transgression of the *aluk pemali* (Haryono & Attilovita 2021:70). The myth of *Londong di Rura* tells of a wealthy nobleman who sought to marry his two biological children in order to preserve his wealth within the family (Allolayuk 2021:65). To obtain religious legitimacy, he sent his servant, *Mangngi'*, to ascend through the *Era di Langi'* and consult *Puang Matua*. However, *Mangngi'* never actually reached *Puang Matua* and instead fabricated a divine message, claiming that incestuous marriage was permissible. Based on this falsehood, the marriage was carried out in grand ceremony (Saleda et al. 2024:115).

This act is understood as a fundamental violation of *pemali*, provoking the wrath of *Puang Matua* upon humanity. As divine judgement, the *Era di Langi'* was destroyed, accompanied by calamities and cosmic curses. From that moment on, humans no longer had direct access to *Puang Matua*. A relationship once characterised by openness and harmony became radically severed. With the collapse of the *Era di Langi'*, vertical communication between humanity and the Creator ceased to exist. Nevertheless, *Puang Matua* continued to love humanity (Darius & Zaluchu 2023:6).

The destruction of the *Era di Langi'* produced deep existential anxiety among adherents of *Aluk To Dolo*, as it was believed to block access to *Puya*, the realm of spirits located at the former foothold of the heavenly ladder. The only path for spirits to enter *Puya* again would be the re-establishment of *Era di Langi'*, an act impossible for humans to accomplish. Restoration could only be initiated by *Puang Matua* through the sending of *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*, a divine emissary tasked with religious restoration and the re-establishment of cosmic harmony between the divine and the human (Kristanto & Mangolo 2018:3). Human response, on the other hand, requires the proper performance of death rituals, believed to be essential for the soul's entry into *Puya*, as mediated by *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* (Haryono & Attilovita 2021:68).

Accordingly, *Era di Langi'* occupies a central place in the theology and cosmology of *Aluk To Dolo*. It functions as a symbol of primordial relationship with *Puang Matua*, a marker of relational rupture because of moral transgression, and a signifier of eschatological hope for cosmic restoration. Its significance demonstrates that *Era di Langi'* is not a mere mythological motif but a fundamental theological category shaping *Aluk To Dolo's* understanding of origins, sin, separation and salvation.

The identity and role of *Puang To Manurun Tamboro Langi'*

The term *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*, often shortened to *To Manurun Tamboro Langi'* or simply *Tamboro Langi'*, consists of several elements: (1) *Puang*, meaning 'lord' or 'noble', an honorific for divine beings [*deata*]; (2) *To Manurun*, meaning 'the one who descends from heaven' (Nooy-Palm 2014:110–111); and (3) *Tamboro Langi'*, meaning 'Sky-Drum' (Waterson 2009:141). The suffix *-Langi'* [heaven] indicates the involvement of a supernatural being who descends to earth (Nooy-Palm 2014:24).

Kristanto and Mangolo (2018:1) note that *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* is regarded as the first human born in the heavens, the offspring of divine beings, and therefore possessing a semi-divine nature. He was later sent from heaven to dwell on earth (Darius & Zaluchu 2023:6), and many Torajans claim descent from him (Nooy-Palm 2014:18). Nonetheless, his narrative varies across regions (Lebang 2010:162).

In Torajan oral tradition – particularly in the Ma'kale version and in western and southern Toraja – *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* is understood as a cosmological, religious and political ancestor who plays a fundamental role in shaping ritual, social and genealogical order. He is portrayed as the heavenly being who descends to restore humanity's broken relationship with the divine by renewing and revealing *aluk* [sacred customary law]. Within this framework, *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* brings the *sukaran aluk sanda saratu'* [7777 customary decrees], which comprehensively regulate death rituals, social regulations, agriculture and societal structure – thereby positioning him as the supreme normative source within Torajan religio-social life (Kristanto & Mangolo 2018:1–2).

Spatially and cosmologically, he is said to have first built a hanging house atop a tree before constructing the first *tongkonan* at Mount Ullin, which functions as the archetypal origin-house and as the centre of Torajan cosmology, genealogy and authority. Through his marriage to *Sanda Bilik*, a being who emerged from water, *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* serves as a cosmic connector between heaven, water and earth, reinforcing the sacred nature of marriage in Torajan cosmology. In the Ma'kale version, he is also seen as the pioneer of sacred arts and rituals, with his appearance accompanied by bell-adorned dances and horn ornaments associated with the *ma'bua'* ritual and *manganda'* dance (Waterson 2009:142–144).

Socially and politically, his lineage forms the basis of noble status [*puang*], expressed concretely through ritual privileges

such as *taa Ullin* in the distribution of meat during funerary ceremonies (Waterson 2009:144). His genealogical line, extending to figures such as Laki Padada who forged alliances with the Kingdom of Gowa, establishes him as a genealogical bridge linking Toraja to major South Sulawesi kingdoms such as Gowa, Luwu' and Sangalla' (Waterson 2009:469).

Beyond these cosmological and political dimensions, he also fulfils a specific religious function as the promulgator of *Aluk Sanda Saratu'*, whose implementation is limited to the *Tallu Lembangna* region, and is considered the second major teaching after *Aluk Sanda Pitunna*, associated with Tangdilino' (Tangdilintin 1983:67). His highest ritual responsibility is realised in the *dirapai* ceremony, the most elevated funerary rite, which is theologically understood to guarantee the salvation of the souls of those within his lineage who concretely perform it – indicating that not all the dead automatically reside in *Puya* (Darius & Zaluchu 2023:6).

Within the soteriological framework of *Aluk To Dolo*, *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* is also understood as a figure sent by *Puang Matua* to repair the human-divine relationship; however, his salvific mission is limited in both subject and scope, applying only to his own descendants. Consequently, the deceased continue to inhabit *Puya*, although they retain an ontological longing for the upper world as the place of human origin (Novianti, Nainggolan & Tumba 2023:34).

Thus, *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* represents a pivotal figure in *Aluk To Dolo* who integrates cosmological, ritual, genealogical and sociopolitical dimensions, and serves as the religious legitimiser for customary order, power structures and the community's soteriological orientation.

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Jesus as the way (Jn 14:6)

The concepts of *Era di Langi'* and *Puang To Manurun Tamboro Langi'* within *Aluk To Dolo* present a theological structure that is functionally parallel to the christological declaration in John 14:6. Nevertheless, both traditions arise from fundamentally different ontological, cosmological and soteriological horizons.

John 14:6 is one of the most explicit and exclusive christological declarations in the Fourth Gospel. Set within Jesus' farewell discourse (Jn 13–17), this statement responds to Thomas's question concerning 'the way' to the place where Jesus is going (v. 5). Jesus' reply – 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' – begins with the formula ἐγώ εἰμι ['I am …'], a self-identification also used to present Him as the Messiah (4:26), the bread of life (6:35, 48, 51), the light of the world (8:12; 9:5), the one 'from above' (8:23), the door of the sheepfold (10:7, 9), the good shepherd (10:11, 14), the resurrection and the life (11:25) and the true vine (15:1) (Borchert 2002). The triad 'way–truth–life' is prefigured in the prologue, albeit in reverse order: the Logos is described as 'life' (1:4), 'the true light' (1:9), who grants access to the Father through His incarnation (1:14) and the fullness of grace He bestows (1:16), enabling humanity to believe in Him (1:12) (Köstenberger 2013:142). Within this narrative framework, Jesus is presented as the divinely sent mediator who embodies a unique relationship with God (cf. 1:1; 3:16).

The phrase 'the way, and the truth, and the life' should not be understood as a Semitism in which 'the way' [ὁδός] functions as the overarching category. Carson (1990:491) emphasises that the three terms are syntactically coordinate rather than subordinate. The prominence of 'the way' arises not from semantic dominance but because it directly answers Thomas's question, reinforced by the following explanatory statement: 'no one comes to the Father except through Me'. Kruse (2017:293) adds that 'the way' forms the core of Jesus' response, while 'truth' and 'life' function as explanatory predicates: Jesus is the way to the Father because He is the truth and the life; or alternatively, Jesus is the way who leads to truth and life (Thompson 2015:308–309).

In other traditions, 'the way' bears different connotations. In Hellenistic religions, it refers to 'the process by which an initiate becomes divine'. In the Old Testament, it signifies the path established by the Torah (Ps 119:30, 34). In Qumran and Acts, it denotes a community and its distinctive lifestyle (1QS IX 17–18, 21; Ac 9:2) (Brodie 1993:462). In contrast, the Johannine text presents Jesus Himself as the locus of access to divine reality, rather than a system, ritual or moral pathway. The 'way' is not a literal route, as Thomas imagines, but Jesus Himself (Michaels 2010:569). Thus, Jesus defines who He is for the disciples: He is the way to the Father (Kieffer 2001:987), through His person, life, teaching, works, death and resurrection (Bruner 2012:811–812).

The explanatory clause – 'no one comes to the Father except through Me' – must be understood within the polemical context between Jewish communities who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those who rejected Him, including experiences of synagogue expulsion (9:22). In this context, the saying functions as an assurance within the Johannine community that access to the Father is mediated through Jesus and not through alternative religious authorities (Smith 1999:269). Michaels (2010:569–570) identifies two

key principles in this verse. Firstly, the exclusivity of salvation: Jesus is the only way to the Father (cf. 6:44, 65) (Ridderbos 1997:493). Secondly, the universality of invitation: all people may come to Him (cf. 10:9). This claim, therefore, may be understood not primarily as restrictive, but as articulating a particular theological perspective on access to divine freedom (8:36) (Klink 2016:616–617). Keener (2003:943) further interprets this exclusivist formulation within the broader Johannine depiction of human alienated from God (3:18–19; 1:10; 1 Jn 5:19), suggesting that Jesus is presented as opening a way that was previously inaccessible.

Similarly, Anderson (2011:184) warns against reducing the text to a divine rule that sets the boundaries of salvation or implies that only adherents of a particular religion will be saved. Within this interpretation, the Johannine text is not understood as proposing a legalistic schema. The issue, Anderson argues, lies in the human condition, rather in divine regulation. Because humanity is portrayed as finite and incapable of fully knowing God, salvation is understood as dependent upon divine self-revelation. Within this framework, God is presented as revealing Himself definitively through the Son. Jesus is thus portrayed as the definitive means of access to God, not as a religious construct but as the expression of divine self-revelation addressing the human inability to know God. The incarnation is interpreted as manifesting divine initiative and love in a manner that is contrasted with law, ritual or religious system understood human constructs. Thus, the emphasis lies on divine initiative as the basis for the possibility of human encounter with God through Christ (Anderson 2011:184).

Within the Johannine theological framework, the claim that Jesus is 'the way' is interpreted as indicating that access to the Father, as well as redemptive truth and eternal life, is mediated through Him (cf. Ac 4:12) (Hendriksen 2002:268–269). This perspective is often associated with the view that access to this 'way' involves a personal response of faith towards Jesus as the mediator (Oliver 2024:5). Within the Johannine narrative, the absence of such faith is depicted as resulting in continued separation from God (Jn 3:18) (Juanda, Binar & Laia 2025:1). Human efforts – whether expressed through religious practices, ritual performance or belief systems – are portrayed as insufficient to establish access to the Father, reflecting the limitations of the human condition (1:10; 8:24). Accordingly, Johannine soteriology presents salvation as grounded in divine initiative in Christ with faith functioning as the appropriate human response, through which the restoration of the human–divine relationship is understood to take place (10:10; 17:3).

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis between *Era di Langi'* and *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* with Christ in John 14:6 is presented in Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4.

This comparative analysis does not equate *Era di Langi'* or *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* with Christ ontologically. Instead, it highlights functional parallels at the phenomenological level concerning the motif of mediating between the divine and human realms. These similarities are limited to symbolic functions, cosmological structures and religious motifs, whereas their fundamental differences lie in theological dimensions – particularly ontology, soteriology and the epistemology of revelation.

Table 1, Table 2, Table 3, and Table 4 serve as the analytical basis for the following interpretive synthesis, which evaluates the theological implications of the identified similarities and differences. Therefore, identifying *Era di Langi'* or *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* as equivalents to Christ as Mediator or Saviour cannot be fully justified, as proposed by Novianti, Nainggolan and Tumba (2023:32–33).

The concept of 'the way' in John 14:6 is not directly comparable to a cosmic pathway or intermediary figure within the cosmology of *Aluk To Dolo*, as Johannine Christology, presents 'the way' as a personal and incarnational reality through which access to the Father is mediated. Thus, the comparison ultimately highlights the distinctive theological claims attributed to Christ within the Johannine tradition in contrast to semi-divine figures or cosmic structures such as *Era di Langi'* and *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*, whose functions are primarily associated with customary and cosmological harmony, reflecting a different soteriological orientation.

Contextualisation study

The narratives of *Era di Langi'* and the figure of *Tamboro Langi'* provide a symbolic framework that may function as a hermeneutical bridge for understanding the meaning of Jesus as 'the way' (Jn 14:6) (Haryono & Attilovita 2021:76) without equating them ontologically. Within the Torajan cosmology, a heavenly being or structure that 'descends' serves to connect humans with the divine order and to restore the harmony of *adat*, offering a phenomenological picture of humanity's longing for access to the upper world.

This contextualisation recognises that the need for a mediator between the upper world and human beings may be understood as a widespread religious intuition, while, within Christian theological interpretation, Christ is presented as transcending such categories. If *Era di Langi'* and *Tamboro Langi'* represent a cosmic-*adat* pathway that regulates the harmony of the world, Christ is understood, within the Christian theological framework, as presenting a path of salvation that is personal, final and universal through His incarnation, work and resurrection. Thus, this approach allows the Gospel to be interpreted through local symbolic categories without collapsing the distinct theological identity attributed to Christ, while also demonstrating that the Torajan cosmological longing for a 'way to the upper world' is interpreted, within the Christian theological framework, as

TABLE 1: Similarities between *Era di Langi'* and Christ.

Aspect	*Era di Langi'*	Christ (Jn 14:6)
Function as a 'connector'	Functions as the cosmic point or central axis connecting the upper world [*langi'*] and the human world.	Becomes the only way that connects humanity with the Father.
Dimension of transcendence	Connects human beings with the divine reality within the cosmological structure of *Aluk To Dolo*.	Connects human beings with the divine reality through communion with God the Father.
Role in accessing the divine	Provides a symbolic structure through which humans may relate to the deities or *Puang Matua*.	Provides eschatological and soteriological access to the Father through His person and work.
Functional soteriological significance	Portrays the means by which humans attain cosmic harmony.	Offers salvation, justification and eternal life.
Central position in the belief system	Holds an important role in the cosmology of *Aluk To Dolo*.	Holds an absolute position in Johannine theology of salvation.

TABLE 2: Differences between *Era di Langi'* and Christ.

Aspect	*Era di Langi'*	Christ (Jn 14:6)
Ontological nature	A cosmological concept – a sacred spatial structure, not a divine person.	A divine person – the Word who became flesh (Jn 1:1, 14).
Relational character	Impersonal; does not offer a personal relationship.	Personal; salvation is mediated through faith in Him.
Type of mediation	Symbolic mediator within the structure of traditional cosmos.	Existential and soteriological mediator through His death and resurrection.
Access to the divine	Access is ritual and communal through customary systems.	Access is granted directly through Christ's redemptive work, not through ritual.
Exclusivity	Lacks exclusivist claims; part of a plural relational system with various deities.	Exclusive: 'No one comes to the Father except through Me'.
Soteriological goal	Restoration of cosmic harmony within ancestral and customary frameworks.	Salvation from sin, eternal life and reconciliation with God.
Basis of authority	Derives from ancestral tradition and cosmology.	Derives from divine authority and God's saving mission in history.
Existential transformation	Does not require personal moral transformation as a condition of salvation.	Demands repentance, faith and renewal of life through the Spirit.

TABLE 3: Similarities between *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* and Christ.

Aspect	*Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*	Jesus (Jn 14:6)
Function as mediator between cosmos and humanity	Understood as a semi-divine being who descends from heaven to restore the severed relationship between humans and the upper world by renewing the *aluk*.	Becomes the definitive mediator between humanity and God the Father through His person and work.
Revelatory role	Brings *Aluk Sanda Saratu'* [7777 decrees] as a revealed customary law governing ritual, social and moral order in Toraja society.	Declares Himself the truth, the final revelation of God; the Word made flesh (Jn 1:1, 14).
Soteriological implications	Seeks cosmic salvation for particular ancestral lines through *dirapai* rituals so that souls may reach *Puya*.	Offers universal salvation to all who believe, guaranteeing access to the Father and eternal life.
Role in community formation	Serves as a source of genealogical legitimacy and sociopolitical structure; founder of the *tongkonan* as the centre of tribal identity.	Serves as the foundation of the community of faith (the Church), sustained by His teaching and work.
Restoration of order	Restores cosmic order through customary laws, rituals and human–deity relations.	Restores the broken relationship between humanity and God; grants new life through the Spirit.

TABLE 4: Differences between *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'* and Christ.

Aspect	*Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*	Jesus (Jn 14:6)
Ontological status	Semi-divine being: descendant of deities; born in heaven yet still a created being.	Divine person: the eternal Logos who was with God and is God (Jn 1:1).
Nature of mission	A cosmogenic and religious envoy who restores and orders customary structures.	An eschatological Saviour who restores humanity's relationship with God and grants eternal life.
Type of revelation	Customary revelation [ritual, social, cosmic laws]: limited in scope and culture [*Tallu Lembangna*].	Universal divine revelation: reveals God fully through His life, teaching, death and resurrection.
Scope of mission	Limited to his lineage and communities practising particular rituals (e.g. *dirapai*).	Universal: the offer of salvation to the whole world (Jn 3:16).
Type of mediation	Symbolic–ritual: access to the divine world is mediated through cosmic structure and customary rites.	Personal–soteriological: access to the Father is granted only through faith-relationship with Christ (Jn 14:6).
Concept of salvation	Salvation = reaching *Puya* and maintaining cosmic harmony; does not involve personal moral transformation.	Salvation = eternal life, new birth and moral–spiritual transformation by the Spirit.
Epistemology of truth	Truth = sacred customary law [*aluk*] handed down through ancestral tradition.	Truth = Jesus Himself as the revelation of God (Jn 14:6; 1:14).
Genealogical role	Basis for aristocratic legitimacy [*puang*] and political identity.	Does not establish a political structure; His Kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36).
Historical–Local limitation	Bound to Torajan local narratives; variations exist across regions (Ma'kale, southern, western).	Universal narrative with global theological significance, consistent within apostolic tradition.
Nature of life	Does not overcome death; souls remain in *Puya,* although longing for the upper world.	Overcomes death; 'I am the life' – offers resurrection and eternal life (Jn 11:25; 14:6).
Mode of presence	Historical–mythological presence in descent-from-heaven narratives; does not continue eschatologically.	Actual historical presence and continuing presence through the Holy Spirit (Jn 14–16).

finding its fulfilment in Christ as the definitive expression of divine revelation. As Kristanto, Purnomo and Laia (2025:6) emphasise, 'Nevertheless, contextualisation must remain critical: enriching the Gospel without diminishing its meaning, and honoring culture without neglecting the uniqueness of Christ as the centre of God's revelation'. This principle may be applied to broader efforts of Gospel contextualisation across diverse belief traditions in Indonesia as a multicultural nation in terms of religion, language, culture, ethnicity and race (Laia 2024:3).

Soteriological implications for contextual theology in Toraja

Several soteriological implications arise for contextual theology in Toraja: (1) The possibility of constructive dialogue. The concepts of a 'way to the upper world' and

the figure of 'the one who descends from heaven' provide functional analogies that facilitate more accessible communication of the Gospel within the Torajan cosmological framework; (2) The danger of syncretism. Functional similarity should not be interpreted as implying ontological sameness. Identifying *Era di Langi'* or *Tamboro Langi'* with Christ risks conflating distinct ontological categories and obscuring the exclusivist claims associated with John 14:6; (3) Christology as a theological point of reorientation. Jesus is not part of the local cosmological structure; He is understood, within Christian theology, as the definitive and universal self-revelation of God. Thus, the concept of *Tamboro Langi'* may be approached as an 'analogical prefiguration', rather than as a theologically equivalent counterpart; and (4) Within the Christian theological framework, salvation is understood as personal rather than genealogical. The Torajan emphasis on genealogical dimensions of salvation may be reinterpreted in dialogue with the view that salvation involves a personal response of faith, rather than an inherited status or a product of ritual-social position.

Conclusion

The dialogue between *Aluk To Dolo* and John 14:6 reveals that both traditions share certain religious motifs: the awareness of a broken human–divine relationship, the need for a mediator and the hope for cosmic restoration. However, these similarities are primarily functional and phenomenological rather than ontological or soteriological. *Era di Langi'* is a cosmological-ritual structure, not a divine person; *Puang Tomanurun Tamboro Langi'*, meanwhile, is a semi-divine figure whose mission is limited by genealogy, locality and ritual.

In contrast, Christ in John 14:6 is presented, within the Johannine framework, as the incarnate, universal and exclusive divine *Logos*, and is portrayed as granting definitive access to the Father through His salvific work. These differences, taken together, challenge attempts to equate the mediators of *Aluk To Dolo* with Christ, as found in certain syncretistic tendencies. Rather than equating them, this study suggests that the religious structure of *Aluk To Dolo* may be understood as an analogical prefiguration that reflects humanity's broader longing for a way to the upper world – yet this longing is interpreted, within Christian theology, as finds its ultimate fulfilment in Christ.

Accordingly, efforts to contextualise the Gospel in Toraja require a critical approach: employing local symbolic frameworks as hermeneutical bridges without obscuring the exclusivist claims attributed to Christ within the Johannine tradition. Such an approach may help to avoid syncretistic interpretations while also strengthening the foundation for contextual forms of Christian witness that seek to remain theologically grounded while being attentive to the cultural cosmology of the Torajan people.

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Sri Binar: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft. Juanda Juanda: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft. Harman Z. Laia: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, 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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