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Theology and education of the indigenous people: A theological-educational reconstruction of the biographies of the 19th century '*Penulong Minahasa*'

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Historical narratives about the evangelism and education in 19th-century Minahasa are often Eurocentric, placing European missionaries at the centre and ignoring the role of indigenous people. This study reconstructs the role of the '*Penulong Minahasa*' [Minahasan's helper] as theological–educational agents who played a role in the indigenisation of the Christian faith and the formation of the local education system. Using a historical-hermeneutic method based on missionary archives and indigenous biographical writings, this study shows that the *Penulong* [helper] were not passive recipients, but active actors who adapted Christian teachings through cultural values and the traditional *Papendangan* education system. Prominent figures such as Adrianus Angkow, Silvanus Item and Lambertus Mangindaan demonstrate the evolution from missionary assistants into educators and community leaders. The main findings of the study confirm that the success of missionary education is rooted in local contextual and participatory principles. The theological and educational spirit of the *Penulong* offers a holistic paradigm for the renewal of Christian education in the era of disruption.

Contribution: By articulating the holistic theological–educational paradigm embodied by the *Penulong*, this study provides a critical framework for renewing Christian education in contemporary contexts of disruption.

Keywords: *Penulong Minahasa*; contextual theology; Christian education; *Papendangan*; indigenisation of faith; postcolonial historiography.

Introduction

The history of Christianity in Minahasa demonstrates the close interconnection between evangelism and educational practices. This relationship is not merely functional, but has been an integral part of the formation of the Minahasa people's social and religious identity since the early 19th century. From the beginning, for missionaries, education was not merely about teaching reading, writing and arithmetic skills, but also part of the mission of evangelism and the internalisation of Christian doctrine. According to Amos, historical evidence indicates that in 1866, *Nederlandsch Zendelinggenootschap* (NZG) established 157 schools, while by 2020, *Gereja Masehi Injili Minahasa* (GMIM) managed more than 1030 schools, confirming the continuity of this tradition (Amos 2021).

However, this historical success faces a sharp paradox in contemporary reality. The Christian educational institutions inherited from the pioneers are now experiencing a profound crisis. Many Christian schools under the auspices of GMIM are considered low-quality, unpopular and even threatened with closure due to limited resources. It reveals a gap between a strong historical legacy and a fragile current situation. This situation demonstrates a phenomenon known as 'historical amnesia', a disconnect between the current generation and the indigenous agency that laid the foundation of Christian education in Minahasa.

This paradoxical phenomenon prompts the main research question: *How can the historical reconstruction of the role of the Penulongs Minahasa in the 19th century as evangelism and educational agents help explain the contrast between the historical success of Christian education in the 19th century and the institutional crisis experienced by Christian schools today, and by education in general, in the era of disruption?*

This question is crucial because the biographies of the *Penulongs* are not merely historical accounts, but rather representations of indigenous agency in the history of the church and education in Minahasa. By re-examining their role, a postcolonial reconstruction is possible that not only repositions local subjects within the historical narrative but also offers models of leadership and education relevant to contemporary challenges.

The inculturation of the Christian faith in Minahasa in the 19th century occurred not only through missionary strategies, but also through the agency of *Penulong*. These missionary figures, initially trained through the murid-stelsel system – a pedagogical model rooted in the foster child pattern and later adopted by Riedel and Schwarz after arriving in Minahasa in 1831 – served beyond their role as missionary assistants (Watuseke 1968). They became indigenous agents who articulated the Christian faith in the local language, culture and life practices. The education they provided was not limited to the transmission of Western literacy, but instilled collectivistic values such as *Mapalus* that resonated with the teachings of the gospel (Rumbay et al. 2022b). Thus, they presented a contextual theological–educational model in which Christianity was rooted in Minahasan culture without abandoning local heritage.

Within the historiography of Christian education, the *Penulong's* existence exhibits a distinctive ambivalence. On the one hand, they are a key pillar of evangelism and education, successfully connecting European missions with local communities. On the other hand, their position was marginalised as European missionaries who became increasingly dependent on the State Church following the NZG financial crisis of the late 19th century. The colonial hierarchy imposed by the *Indische Kerk* subordinated *Penulong* and congregational teachers, thereby limiting their opportunities to participate in church and educational decision-making (Steenbrink & Aritonang 2008). This situation created a tension between the legacy of vibrant local agency and hegemonic institutional structures – a tension whose traces can still be felt today.

Theoretical framework

Research by Ariel Lopez shows that the mass conversion of Minahasans was not solely the result of missionary strategies, but was closely linked to the dynamics of Dutch colonialism and local politics. Factors such as the ban on headhunting, the forced coffee cultivation system and the monetarist economic policies under Resident Jansen (1853–1859) shook the social structure and weakened the authority of local leaders. In this situation, many Minahasans chose Christianity not only as a new faith but also as a social strategy to escape economic pressures and restrictive traditional rituals. Conversely, elites like OJ Pelenkahu utilised Christianisation to strengthen their political legitimacy (Lopez 2018). Thus, Christian conversion in Minahasa was an arena of complex negotiations between missionaries, the colonial government, local elites and communities seeking a way out of the social and authority crisis.

The framework of the contact zone, Pratt (1991), helps interpret this dynamic as a space of cultural encounter fraught with unequal power relations, a place of negotiation and hybridity. In this context, the *Penulong* play a key role in translating the language, symbols and practices of Christian education into the Minahasan cultural horizon. Through them, religious expressions emerge that utilise colonial instruments – such as schools and liturgy – but are reinterpreted locally. Therefore, the history of Christian education in Minahasa can be read not as an extension of colonialism, but as the creative work of indigenous communities in shaping their religious and social identities.

This approach simultaneously affirms the principle of contextual theology that faith is always incarnated in culture. The *Penulong* bear witness to how the gospel takes root through the transformation of local symbols and values: *Mapalus* [collective work] and cosmic balance in the Walian tradition are translated into Christian love and service. They are not merely part of the colonial or ecclesiastical system, but actors in the 'zone in between' where theology, politics and education interact to shape new religious subjects.

More broadly, this dynamic demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between Christian education, colonialism and local culture. While serving as a medium for 'westernisation' (Amos 2021), missionary education also served as a space for inculturation, as indigenous people actively participated in educational practices. In Minahasa, education served as a means of internalising local values and fostering both religious and socio-political awareness. Therefore, the *Penulongs* were not merely extensions of the mission, but historical subjects who mediated the transformation of faith, culture and society in the 19th century.

Research methods and design

This research employs a qualitative approach with a historical-hermeneutic method. This approach enables the analysis of missionary archival texts, church documents and biographical narratives of the *Penulongs* to uncover the theological and social meanings hidden behind historical events. The analysis is conducted interpretively, taking into account the social, political and religious context of 19th-century Minahasa, as well as the dialectical relationship between local traditions and colonial influences.

The main primary sources include the Maandberigt van het NZG (1834–1895 edition), Van Rhijn's (1851) travel report, and the writings of J.F. Riedel and N. Graafland. Secondary sources include the historiographical and theological work of Bertha Pantouw, several cultural changes in Central Minahasa, 1829–1859: a historical study based on the writings of J.G. Schwarz (Dissertation at the Graduate Programme, University of Indonesia, 1994), *De Zending in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Gunning 1913), and Lopez (2018). Text analysis is conducted through critical readings that highlight the symbols, power relations and representational strategies used to depict indigenous agency.

By combining historical analysis and theological hermeneutics, this study seeks to reconstruct the role of the *Penulong Minahasa* not merely as a colonial instrument but as a contextual agent actively shaping the meaning of faith and education in its society. Through a postcolonial reading strategy, this study repositions the local subject within the historiography of the Indonesian church and Christian education.

The urgency of this research lies in the need to uncover the 'historical amnesia' that obscures the role of the *Penulongs* and to reassert their relevance for contemporary Christian education. If the roots of Christian education in Minahasa lie in its engagement with local culture through indigenous agency, then the solution to the current crisis must be found in similar principles: contextual, participatory education rooted in spirituality and community solidarity. Therefore, the biographies of the Minahasan *Penulongs* are primarily a source of strategic inspiration for redefining the direction of Christian education in Minahasa in the 21st century.

Discussion

Theological reconstruction: Indigenous interpretation and adaptation

In the 19th century, the term '*Penulong Minahasa*' referred to local leaders who served as disseminators of the Christian narrative. Missionaries strategically trained individuals already influential within traditional leadership systems such as Tona'as and Walian. Over time, this role was formalised into congregational teachers [*guru jemaat*] or native pastors [*inlands lerari*], although they remained subordinate to European hierarchies. A turning point in this evolution occurred with the emergence of organisations such as *Persatuan Pangkal Setia* [week school system] around 1915, marking a shift from individual agency under colonial structures to a collective movement striving for ecclesiastical and educational autonomy (Burdam 2001).

During the same period, Minahasa's history also witnessed a significant encounter between Christianity, which arrived with the Dutch mission, and indigenous spirituality rooted in the Walian tradition. This encounter was not simply a clash between faith and 'paganism', but rather a process of theological transformation involving symbolic dialogue, practical adjustments and the formation of new religious subjects. It was in this context that the so-called Minahasa emerged: Indigenous Christian teachers who translated faith into local languages and thought frameworks (Rumbay et al. 2022b).

As a socio-religious category, the *Penulong Minahasa* was not only the result of a mission programme designed by the NZG, but also a representation of local agency actively negotiating with the new colonial and theological order. From the beginning, the missionary project in Minahasa was not merely a unilateral effort by the missionaries, but rather the result of a complex interaction between culture, language and local knowledge. The *Maandberigt van het NZG* [monthly bulletin of the NZG] (1847, no. 11) notes that since the arrival of the missionaries, the mission's primary strategy has been to educate 'indigenous youths who have influence among their people' so they can assist in the work of the gospel. This educational process, although designed by the mission, soon became an arena in which the Minahasan people began to reinterpret Christian teachings from their own perspective.

In such situations, the *Penulong* acts as 'cross-interpreters' of the gospel and culture. They depart from the Minahasan value system, which emphasises balance, social harmony and respect for *Opo' Empung* – the highest spiritual concept in Walian cosmology (Rumbay, Hartono & Siahaya 2022a; Rumbay & Siahaya 2023). When they embraced Christianity, these values were not abandoned but integrated into a new form of faith. Within this framework, the *Penulong's* role cannot be reduced to a missionary tool but rather to that of a creative agent of theological reconstruction.

J.W Gunning in *De Zending in Nederlandsch-Indië* [missionary in Indonesia] asserted that the task of a true missionary is to 'first become a disciple of the people he serves', because only by understanding the indigenous religious experience can the gospel truly take root (Gunning 1913). This view reflects a new awareness in the missionary movement of the early 20th century: That mission cannot be carried out by eliminating local culture, but must be carried out through the discovery of the elements of truth contained within it. Therefore, the *Penulong Minahasa* became an ideal embodiment of a mission that respects local culture, in which the gospel is experienced as something that does not suppress but reinterprets old wisdom in light of new revelation.

Before the arrival of European missions, the Minahasan people already had a traditional education system called *Papendangan* – a form of collective learning in which young men were educated by *Tona'as* [tribe leader] and *Walian* [guardians] in social sciences, politics, agriculture, health and spirituality. According to H.M Taulu, *Papendangan* was a leadership education centre that prepared the next generation of society through character building and mastery of life's knowledge. The teachers were called *Mapendang*, while the students were called *pahayoan* (Taulu 1979). In this system, learning was not merely memorising teachings, but rather experiencing life with nature, others and spiritual forces. Knowledge was acquired through living examples and reflection on collective experiences.

When the missionary education system was introduced by the NZG in the 1830s, two worlds of knowledge met: *Papendangan*, based on spirituality and local communities, and missionary schools, grounded in literacy, rationality and Christian theology. Within the framework of Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone theory, this encounter became a space of interaction where two cultures exchanged meaning, experienced tension, but also created new forms of hybridity. In Minahasa, this contact zone gave birth to a

new generation that was neither entirely colonial nor traditional. Missionary education did not eliminate *Papendangan*, but rather gave rise to a 'new *Papendangan*' – a space for learning faith that combined modern discipline and local wisdom.

Such transformation is called a 'new *Papendangan*', a way of viewing and understanding the world from a Minahasan cultural perspective now infused with Christian values (Mamangkey, Gosal & Mononimbar 2016). In this space of dialogue, the *Penulongs* emerged from the confluence of two epistemologies: one rooted in communal spirituality and the other in the rationality of Western education. They became hybrid subjects capable of negotiating between the two worlds, interpreting the gospel text with a *Mapalus* spirit, and teaching the faith in an idiom understood by their own community.

Thus, missionary schools can be understood not merely as colonial instruments, but as arenas where the process of theological indigenisation took place. The mission, which initially aimed to train local teachers, created space for the formation of indigenous intellectuals aware of their own identity. Education not only transmitted dogma but also ignited new theological imaginations: how to become Christian without leaving Minahasa.

The concept of the *Penulong* [helper] reflects the complex process of religious subject formation in Minahasa. As missionary assistants, they worked within the colonial church structure while simultaneously becoming key actors in on-the-ground evangelism. In practice, they filled missionary gaps in remote areas, leading services, teaching children and even interpreting the Bible in local languages. Thus, they played a central role in bridging the gospel and local culture, presenting Christianity not as a foreign narrative but as an extension of Minahasan spirituality.

Gunning emphasised that true mission cannot be achieved by eliminating the culture that has been shaped by human religious experience (Gunning 1913). Therefore, the *Penulongs*, such as Angkow, Item, Tiwow and Kowaas, become ideal embodiments of theology rooted in local culture. They practise their faith not by rejecting tradition, but by reinterpreting its symbols. The values of balance and harmony at the heart of Walian spirituality are translated into love and service within the framework of the Christian faith. *Opo' Empung*, traditionally understood as the supreme spirit, is reinterpreted as a transcendent God.

Within the *Penulongs*, a transformation of meaning has occurred without losing its cultural roots. They are not 'European-educated Christians', but rather Christians with a Minahasan accent – a faith rooted in their own land and culture. Therefore, their existence marks a significant shift from Christianisation to theological indigenisation. The history of the *Penulong Minahasa* demonstrates that the gospel was not simply implanted, but grew and bore fruit through interpretation, negotiation and the creation of meaning by the Minahasan people themselves.

Comparative biographical reconstruction: Key figures of the *Penulong*

Adrianus Angkow: First aid and interpreter of faith

Adrianus Angkow is known as the first *Penulong* [helper] from Minahasa. He came from the Constanz family in Kema and was first met by missionaries J.G. Schwarz and J.F. Riedel when they visited the family's home. At the time, Angkow was only about 16 years old, but showed intelligence and a strong desire to learn. Schwarz then took him as a pupil in the foster child system [*anak piara*] – an early mission education model in which missionaries directly mentored native students to assist with ministry and teaching (Pantouw 1994).

During his education, Angkow lived with the Schwarz family and was shaped by spiritual discipline and the study of scriptures. He was fluent in Malay, which made it easy for him to serve as a liaison between the missionaries and the Minahasan community. On 18 April 1847, during Inspector NZG Van Rhijn's visit to Minahasa, Angkow was ordained as the first helper in a service in Langowan attended by the missionaries, the village head and the Christian congregation (Coolsma 1901; Van Rhijn 1851). Following his ordination, he was stationed in Sonder and then in Langowan, assisting Schwarz in his ministry duties in the missionaries' absence.

Angkow quickly became known for his ability to interpret and teach Christian teachings in local languages and ways of thinking. In worship, he introduced a gathering pattern similar to the Mapalus tradition, where the community prayed and studied the Bible together in a spirit of mutual cooperation. He also introduced the use of local languages in teaching, making the gospel easier to understand. With his perseverance and intelligence, Angkow became a bridge between two worlds: the Christian faith and Minahasan spirituality. He was not simply an extension of the missionary work, but a theological adaptor who brought Christianity to life in the local context.

In Adrianus Angkow, the birth of a new religious subject is clearly visible, formed in the contact zone between missionary education and Minahasan culture (Pratt 1991). He brought Christian values to the community without severing their socio-cultural roots. As such, he can be called an early architect of Minahasan inculturative theology – a student, teacher and interpreter of faith all at once.

Silvanus Item: From Walian to gospel teacher

Silvanus Item was born near Lake Tondano into an influential family of guardians [*Walian*]. His given name, Timbeler, was given to him by his grandfather, Ahuw, a village headman who still adhered to Minahasan religion. His close relationship with the Walian shaped his spiritual character, making him sensitive to the values of life and nature. However, fate left

him orphaned at the age of two due to a smallpox epidemic in 1819. The disease scarred his body, leading his friends to call him 'Item' (Pantouw 1994).

Riedel first met Item through his grandfather. It is said that Riedel, having recently arrived in Tondano, often fished by the lake to get to know the locals. From that simple meeting, a friendship developed between Riedel and Ahuw. The grandfather then asked Riedel to educate his grandson. The request was granted, and from then on, Item became Riedel's student. He learned to read, write and recite the Bible, absorbing Christian moral values. In 1835, he was baptised and given the new name Silvanus Item.

As Riedel's student, Item demonstrated extraordinary intelligence and perseverance. He later assisted Schwarz in his ministry in Langowan and Kakas. In his ministry, he taught the Christian faith in ways that were close to the local customs: using parables from nature, speaking of love using the symbol of the *Mapalus* [a local term of 'working together'] and interpreting salvation as the harmony of life. With these abilities, he became known as a teacher who taught the gospel without abandoning tradition.

In 1857, Silvanus Item was ordained as a *Penulong* [helper] 10 years after Adrianus Angkow. Thus, these two figures became the vanguard of the indigenisation of church ministry in Minahasa. They connected missionary work to community life and made Christian faith a collective experience rather than a foreign teaching. In Silvanus Item, the tradition of the Walian found a new form: not as an abandoned old ritual, but as a spirituality transformed and sanctified through loving service.

Ismail Tiwow: Representation of a modern Christian teacher

Ismail Tiwow was a key figure in the history of the modernisation of Christian education in Minahasa. He was born in Ranowangko to a non-Christian family, and his father intended him to become a Walian. However, his fate changed when he became 'a foster child' [*anak piara*] of the missionary [*zending*] school supervisor in Amurang, within the missionary service area of K.T. Hermann. He then moved to Tanawangko and expressed his desire to become a teacher to N. Graafland (1863).

Tiwow showed remarkable progress. He diligently discussed matters with Graafland every 3 weeks, developed his own teaching method and wrote a catechism dictation for which Graafland later praised him. In the newspaper *Tjahaja Sijang* (01 March 1873), Graafland called him 'the most learned Minahasan I have ever known … in many ways he has become my duplicate'. In late 1862, Tiwow died at the age of 26, leaving behind a vast intellectual and spiritual legacy.

Tiwow's story demonstrates the success of the *Kweekschool* [week school system] project in Tanawangko, a native teacher training school that became a centre for the formation of local Christian cadres. Within the framework of Pratt's contact zone theory, Tiwow occupies a hybrid subject position at the intersection of the traditional *Papendangan* system and modern *Zending* [missionary] education. He, who was originally prepared to become a Walian, transformed into a tuan guru – a new representation of Minahasa religious and intellectual leadership. In him, the Walian tradition found a new form: no longer a traditional priest, but a faith educator who united local knowledge with modern disciplines.

Petrus Kowaas: Apostle from Ranowangko

Petrus Kowaas, often called the 'Apostle of Ranowangko', is the most powerful example of spiritual hybridity among the *Penulongs*. He came from a family of *Walian Mangundam* – a tradition of healing and ritual healing (Hooker 1895). This background familiarised him with the spiritual world and healing, a legacy he carried into Christian ministry. When he later became a minister of the gospel, Kowaas did not abandon his traditional knowledge but reinterpreted it in light of the gospel.

During the plague that struck Minahasa, Kowaas became known for his service to the sick. He treated them with herbal remedies, praying and teaching Christian hope. During burials, he introduced new customs that combined traditional reverence and church liturgy. Through his ministry, Kowaas demonstrated that Christian faith need not reject ancestral wisdom but can sanctify local values through active love.

With this approach, Kowaas became a model of a *Penulong* who combined pastoral care with cultural wisdom. He developed a theology rooted in practice: love as concrete action. In doing so, he demonstrated the social, empathetic and contextual face of Minahasan Christianity – a faith that thrived amid the suffering of its people.

Lambertus Mangindaan: From theology to political awareness

Lambertus Mangindaan marked a new chapter in the development of religious and political awareness in Minahasa in the second half of the 19th century. He studied theology in Rotterdam in 1856 with academic standards equivalent to those of European missionaries, but upon returning home, he was rejected for appointment as a pastor by the *Indische Kerk* (Burdam 2001). This rejection became a turning point that fostered his awareness of the racial discrimination and colonial injustices hidden behind church institutions. While serving in Manado as an assistant to pastor F.H. Linnemann – a European preacher within the *Indische Kerk* structure – Mangindaan realised that, despite his high education and theological qualifications equivalent to *zendeling* [missionary], he was still treated as a subordinate to the European missionaries. In the hierarchical colonial church system, local teachers and *Penulong* were not fully recognised. This situation was a direct result of the 1854 contract between the Dutch East Indies government and the NZG, which placed the *Penulong* [*helper*] under the authority of European preachers in colonial centres such as Ambon, Manado, Makassar and Kupang. This structure was later criticised by

Mangindaan as reflecting the theological and social subordination of the indigenous people [*Pinontoan*].

From this awareness, Mangindaan developed theological thinking rooted in the spirit of emancipation. In Tondano, on 24 May 1871, he completed an article entitled '*Oud Tondano*' [Old Tondano], which was later published in *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* (Mangindaan 1873). In his writing, he reinterpreted the Tondano War (1808–1809) as an expression of the Minahasan people's character and aspirations for freedom. For him, faith should not be limited to personal salvation, but rather must be a social force that rejects oppression and injustice. Thus, he positioned theology as a tool of emancipation rather than subordination. In this regard, Christianity has provided a language of emancipation in Minahasa since 1878, when Lambertus Mangindaan persistently linked his preaching of freedom with protests against the takeover of the NZG mission church by the bureaucratic Church of the Indies (Van Klinken 2010). Mangindaan's ideas would later inspire the spirit of the *Pangkal Setia* movement and the founding of the *Kerapatan Gereja Protestant Minahasa* [The Union of Minahasan Protestant Church] (KGPM) liberation church. As a *Penulong* of the next generation, he marked an important transition from religious agency to political awareness: from pastoral service to a critical awareness that faith, knowledge and social liberation are an inseparable vocation.

Educational reconstruction: Strategic adoption of *Papendangan*

From *Papendangan* to *Anak Piara* [foster child]

The encounter between Christianity and Minahasan spirituality in the 19th century not only introduced a new religion but also sparked a cultural dialogue that led to theological reconstruction. In this process, the *Penulong Minahasa*n emerged not as objects of mission but as subjects of theology interpreting the gospel through their own cultural values. They made education a living manifestation of faith, where teaching and service were integrated into social practice.

Within Mary Louise Pratt's contact zone framework, the Dutch mission and the Minahasan people met in a hybrid space between Western rationality and local spirituality. This space became an arena where concepts of God, humanity and knowledge were negotiated in the language of Minahasan culture. It was here that *Papendangan* – a traditional educational system emphasising collective learning, cosmic balance and an ethic of togetherness (Taulu 1979; Wowor 2010) – became the foundation for the emergence of a new form of Christian education.

The arrival of the NZG missionaries in the 1830s introduced the student system [*murid-stelsel*] and the week school system [*kweekschool*], which instilled literacy, discipline and a Protestant work ethic. However, this system was soon assimilated into the *Papendangan* tradition. The teacher–student relationship remained personal, based on example and life experience. Thus, missionary schools were not a break with old traditions, but rather a 'new *Papendangan*' that combined local spirituality with Western educational rationality.

In this context, *Penulongs*, such as Adrianus Angkow and Silvanus Item, act as a bridge between the two worlds. Through the *anak piara* [foster child] system, they learn directly from *zendeling* yet teach their faith in Minahasan idioms, with a spirit of *Mapalus* and community solidarity. They create a holistic educational model – one that not only cultivates intelligence but also fosters morality, spirituality and social responsibility.

The transition from *Papendangan* to *Zending* education marked the birth of a new paradigm: knowledge was studied critically, but remained rooted in a shared ethos. Faith did not replace tradition, but rather complemented it. The values of the Walian – balance, respect for the *Opo' Empung* and social harmony – were translated into Christ's love and service. *Penulongs* became mediators between the old and new worlds, between ancestral spirituality and Protestant theology. In their hands, *Papendangan* took on a new form: education that fostered both faith and humanity.

Meaning for the present: Holistic education in the era of disruption

Rereading the history of *Penulong* in Minahasa reveals a striking contrast between the vitality of 19th-century Christian education and the institutional challenges faced by Christian schools today. In the earlier period, education functioned as a driving force for social and spiritual renewal, producing figures such as Ismail Tiwow and Lambertus Mangindaan, who embodied both intellectual formation and moral integrity. *Zending* schools were not merely centres of instruction, but spaces for the cultivation of faith, character and communal responsibility. Their strength lay in the integration of Christian teaching with local values such as Mapalus and *Papendangan* principles of mutual cooperation, togetherness and reverence for life.

However, this holistic vision did not simply fade without cause. Over time, processes such as colonial standardisation of schooling, the post-independence expansion of national education systems, bureaucratisation and the increasing emphasis on formal certification gradually reshaped the character of education. These shifts contributed to the marginalisation of local wisdom traditions and the weakening of the formative, community-based role once embodied by the *Penulong*.

The loss of the holistic dimension of education can therefore be traced to these historical transformations. In the classical *Papendangan* and *Zending* systems, knowledge, morality and spirituality were deeply intertwined with learning rooted in lived experience – through work, service and reflection. Education aimed not only at intellectual development, but at cultivating wisdom and a sense of vocation. The *Penulong*

functioned as more than teachers; they were moral leaders and community guides who embodied and transmitted a vision of knowledge as inseparable from love and action. Yet as education became increasingly institutionalised and aligned with national and global standards, its orientation shifted. Administrative demands, standardised curricula and performance metrics gradually replaced relational and experiential modes of learning. In this process, the *Penulong* model and *Papendangan* practices were not intentionally discarded but were gradually sidelined as they were perceived as less compatible with modern systems of schooling.

In contrast, contemporary education in an era of disruption tends to emphasise cognitive achievement and competition. Schools are often driven by measurable outcomes, producing students who may excel academically but lack depth in empathy, spirituality and social responsibility. This condition is not merely a cultural shift, but the result of long-term structural changes in educational policy, governance and epistemology. Knowledge has become increasingly fragmented and instrumentalised, while its deeper meaning is often neglected. Within this context of what may be called an epistemological disruption, the spirit of *Papendangan* can be reread as a relevant and corrective paradigm – one that re-centres education as a communal and holistic process. It emphasises that true learning involves the formation of the whole person: spiritual, social and intellectual.

In today's fast-paced digital context, the legacy of the *Penulong* offers a compelling source of inspiration. Their model of life was relational, grounded in service and oriented toward the common good. Reclaiming this vision does not imply a return to the past, but a creative retrieval. Just as the *Penulong* once bridged the gospel and local tradition, contemporary Christian education is called to form 'new *Penulong*' who can navigate and mediate between faith and technology, human values and algorithmic systems. Education must once again become a 'contact zone' – a dynamic space where individuals engage with change critically without losing their identity.

This reconstruction affirms that authentic Christian education is always rooted in lived practice: in love that builds community and in liberation that fosters critical responsibility. While *Papendangan* and the *Penulong* emerged within a specific historical context, their underlying principles remain relevant. The challenge today is to reinterpret and embody these values within contemporary structures, restoring the relationship between humanity, God, others and creation. Christian educators are thus called not only to transmit knowledge, but to serve as modern *Mapendang* [education or teacher] guides who cultivate wisdom and discernment in an increasingly complex world.

Ultimately, the history of the *Penulong* in Minahasa serves as a mirror for the present. It demonstrates that education rooted in faith and culture has the power to generate profound social transformation. As both a learning model and a formative figure, *Papendangan* and the *Penulong* offer a holistic paradigm that integrates spirituality and rationality, tradition and innovation, locality and global engagement. In an era marked by disruption, this vision provides a foundation for renewing Christian education as a practice shaped by dialogue, love and service.

Conclusion

A historical reconstruction of the *Penulong Minahasa* demonstrates that the success of 19th-century Christian education was not solely the result of Dutch missionary strategies, but rather the existence of local agencies interpreting faith within their own cultural horizons. The *Penulongs* – from Adrianus Angkow to Lambertus Mangindaan – became theological–educational figures who combined gospel values with Minahasan life principles such as *Mapalus* and *Papendangan*. Through their actions and example, the gospel was translated into a way of life: learning, serving and living together. Education did not stop at the acquisition of knowledge, but became a path to spiritual and social transformation.

A reading of contact zone theory (Pratt 1991) confirms that Christian education in Minahasa resulted from a negotiation between European rationality and local spirituality. Missionary schools functioned as arenas of hybridity, where theology and culture met to give birth to new religious identities. In this space, the *Penulongs* played a key role as mediators, bringing the gospel to life in the Minahasan language and practice. They proved that contextual proclamation of faith was more effective than missions that imposed external theological formalism. In other words, the historical success of 19th-century Christian education lay in its relational depth – between teacher and student, between faith and culture, between text and experience.

In contrast, the institutional crisis of contemporary Christian schools demonstrates a disconnect from these historical roots. Educational institutions, once centres of character formation, have often lost their spiritual and social orientation. Amid digital disruption, education is increasingly reduced to a system of competencies and administration, rather than a process of developing whole people. This is where historical reflection on the *Penulong* becomes relevant: they demonstrate that true education arises from engagement, not mere instruction; from relationships, not mere regulation.

By emulating the spirit of the new *Papendangan*, which fosters dialogue between faith and culture, Christian education can rediscover its mission as a space for the formation of wisdom and love. The *Penulongs* teach that faith rooted in one's own land can give birth to moral and social strength that withstands changing times. In today's context, this calling poses a challenge for the church and educators: to produce new *Penulong* in the digital age – educators who are theologically minded, service-minded and rooted in human solidarity. Only in this way can Christian education once

again become a force for liberation and social renewal, as it was in the Minahasa lands of the 19th century.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Meily M. Wagiu: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Visualisation, Writing – original draft. Jekson Berdame: Data curation, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing. Denni H.R. Pinontoan: Supervision, 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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