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Between Wisdom and Ritual: A Biblical Response to *Raego* among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* of Indonesia

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Raego remains an important oral tradition among the *To Kaili* [Kaili people] and *To Kulawi* [Kulawi people] communities of Central Sulawesi, yet its theological significance has received limited scholarly attention. Using a qualitative literature-based approach, this study undertakes a close reading of documented *Raego* chants informed by oral tradition studies, ethnographic research, and biblical theology. The findings show that *Raego* simultaneously embodies communal wisdom and ritual cosmology. While the chants preserve values such as solidarity, gratitude, and intergenerational continuity, they also contain sacred invocations and patterns of spiritual mediation that raise theological questions for Christian communities.

Contribution: This article proposes a biblically grounded framework for engaging indigenous oral traditions through critical contextualisation. It demonstrates how close textual analysis of documented ritual chants can help distinguish communal values that may be affirmed from ritual meanings that require theological evaluation in light of Scripture.

Keywords: *Raego*; communal wisdom; ritual cosmology; critical contextualisation; oral tradition.

Introduction

Indigenous oral traditions continue to shape religious imagination, communal identity, and moral formation in many societies. They often serve not merely as artistic performances or repositories of folklore, but also as means of preserving collective memory, transmitting ethical values, strengthening social cohesion, and expressing a community's understanding of the sacred through ritual speech and embodied performance (Masoga 2022; Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:3–13). Within Christian contexts, however, these traditions often present theological challenges because cultural wisdom is frequently intertwined with assumptions about divine authority, spiritual mediation, and worship. Contemporary contextual theology therefore increasingly argues that indigenous traditions should neither be dismissed as remnants of pre-Christian religion nor embraced uncritically but discerned in the light of Scripture (Bevans 2002:15–21; Hiebert 1984:104–112; Chia 2024).

Raego, an indigenous oral tradition practised among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities of Central Sulawesi, illustrates this complexity. Performed through collective chanting, rhythmic movement, and ritual participation, *Raego* accompanies agricultural celebrations, marriage ceremonies, healing rituals, and funeral observances. Beyond performance, it preserves communal memory, transmits customary values, reinforces social solidarity, and articulates relationships between humanity, nature, and the spiritual realm (Aragon 1996:678–685, 2000:245–267; Yunidar 2023:714–717). Its continued practice within several Christian communities further indicates that the tradition remains socially and culturally significant despite the widespread expansion of Christianity in Central Sulawesi.

Scholarship on *Raego* has expanded considerably from anthropological, ethnomusicological, linguistic, and cultural perspectives. Early documentation associated with S.J. Esser, preserved through Noorduyn (1963), provided one of the earliest records of *Raego* texts. Subsequent studies have explored its performative structure, symbolic language, ritual functions, and social significance (Aragon 1996; Ma'ruf 2023; Stanzah 2018; Tampinongo 2016; Yunidar 2023). Together, these studies establish *Raego* as a living oral tradition through which communal identity, moral values, and ritual knowledge continue to be transmitted across generations.

Theological engagement with *Raego*, however, remains limited, particularly within Indonesian evangelical scholarship. Although previous research has documented its history, symbolism, and ritual functions, few studies have examined the theological significance of its documented chants

through sustained biblical reflection. As a result, Christian responses have often moved between two opposing tendencies: Rejecting indigenous traditions because of their association with ancestral mediation and ritual cosmology (Hiebert 1984:142–144; Wright 2006:189–205) or emphasising cultural preservation without adequately addressing questions of worship, spiritual mediation, and divine authority (Bevans 2002:17–20). Neither approach sufficiently accounts for the need to distinguish communal wisdom from ritual meanings that require theological evaluation.

Recent theological scholarship has begun to address similar issues in Central Sulawesi. Depparua, Tjandra and Sunkudon (2026), for example, argue that the primary theological challenge within the Kaili healing tradition of *Balia* lies not in its social or therapeutic functions but in its claims regarding spiritual mediation and ritual authority. Yet despite the comparable significance of *Raego* among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi*, no study has undertaken a sustained biblical-theological analysis grounded in the close reading of documented *Raego* chants while integrating oral tradition studies with critical contextualisation.

This article addresses that gap by examining documented *Raego* chants alongside ethnographic evidence through the lenses of oral tradition studies, biblical theology, and critical contextualisation. It argues that *Raego* simultaneously embodies communal wisdom and ritual cosmology, making it inadequate to interpret the tradition either as mere cultural folklore or simply as a syncretistic ritual practice (Bauman 1975:291–294). By integrating close textual analysis with theological reflection, this study proposes a biblically grounded framework for discerning indigenous ritual traditions that distinguishes communal values which may be affirmed from ritual meanings that require theological evaluation (Juanda, Sunkudon & Tjandra 2025).

Research methods and design

This study employs a qualitative literature-based approach to examine *Raego* among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities through the integrated perspectives of oral tradition studies, contextual theology, and biblical theology. A qualitative design is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret meanings embedded in oral texts, ritual performances, and indigenous religious practices rather than to measure social phenomena quantitatively. Literature-based theological research also enables critical engagement with documented cultural traditions preserved through ethnographic, historical, linguistic, and anthropological scholarship (Creswell & Poth 2018).

Rather than reconstructing contemporary *Raego* ethnographically, the study investigates how the tradition simultaneously embodies communal wisdom and ritual cosmology, and how these dimensions may be evaluated within a biblical-theological framework. Such an interpretive approach is particularly suitable for oral traditions, which transmit social memory, moral instruction, ritual symbolism, communal identity, and religious worldview through performance and repetition (Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:3–13).

The primary sources comprise documented *Raego* chants, ethnographic accounts, and scholarly studies of ritual practices among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities. These include the early documentation associated with S.J. Esser, preserved through Noorduyn (1963), anthropological analyses of ritual performance (Aragon 1996, 2000), ethnomusicological studies of *Raego* songs (Stanzah 2018), research on the symbolic meanings of Rego chants (Yunidar 2023), descriptions of *Rego Mpae* in agricultural rituals (Ma'ruf 2023), and documentation of *Raego* within Kulawi marriage traditions (Tampinongo 2016). Together, these sources provide complementary evidence concerning the textual, ritual, symbolic, and cosmological dimensions of *Raego*.

The analysis focuses on representative chants drawn from different ritual settings, including opening invocations, harvest ceremonies, children's rituals, and closing chants. These texts were selected because they recur consistently across the available documentation and contain explicit moral, cosmological, and theological themes relevant to the aims of the study. The emphasis is therefore analytical rather than statistical, seeking recurring patterns of meaning rather than documenting every local variation.

The analytical framework integrates three complementary perspectives. Oral tradition studies illuminate how ritual speech, repetition, and performance transmit cultural memory and moral formation within oral societies (Ong 1982:31–57; Vansina 1985:27–43). Contextual theology provides the conceptual framework for examining the relationship between Christian faith and indigenous culture (Bevans 2002:15–21). The biblical evaluation is guided by Paul G. Hiebert's model of critical contextualisation, which enables cultural practices to be examined under the authority of Scripture while respecting the integrity of indigenous communities (Hiebert 1984:104–112).

Analysis proceeded in four stages: (1) collecting documented *Raego* chants and relevant ethnographic materials; (2) conducting close textual readings to identify recurring themes of communal wisdom, sacred invocation, spiritual mediation, gratitude, and collective memory; (3) interpreting these themes within their broader ritual and cultural contexts; and (4) evaluating them through biblical theology and critical contextualisation to distinguish cultural values that may be affirmed from ritual meanings requiring theological discernment.

By integrating documented oral texts, ethnographic evidence, and biblical-theological reflection, this methodology seeks to provide a historically grounded and theologically responsible evaluation of *Raego* that remains attentive to both the integrity of indigenous culture and the normative authority of Scripture.

Raego as communal wisdom

Understanding *Raego* as a tradition of communal wisdom requires close attention to its documented chants rather than relying solely on general descriptions of ritual practice. In oral societies, chants are more than artistic expressions; they function as performative speech through which moral values, communal memory, social relationships, and religious worldviews are transmitted across generations (Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:27–43). The theological significance of *Raego* therefore lies not only in its ritual performance but also in the language and symbolism embedded within its oral texts.

The following discussion examines representative chants documented in ethnographic and cultural studies, including opening invocations, harvest rituals, and mourning traditions (Aragon 1996; Ma'ruf 2023; Noorduyn 1963; Stanzah 2018; Yunidar 2023). These examples represent recurring ritual settings through which *Raego* transmits communal wisdom among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities. Each chant is analysed in relation to its linguistic features, ritual context, and social function before its theological implications are considered. This approach provides the basis for distinguishing between communal values that resonate with biblical wisdom and ritual meanings that require further theological discernment.

Communal wisdom in the opening chant

The opening chant occupies a pivotal place in *Raego* because it establishes the ritual atmosphere and invites participants into a shared space of communal participation. Rather than functioning as a simple introduction, it publicly affirms communal identity and prepares the participants to enter a ritual encounter with the sacred. As in many oral traditions, the opening formula marks the transition from ordinary social interaction to ritual performance through rhythmic repetition and collective participation (Ong 1982:36–43; Vansina 1985:39–43).

One opening chant documented among the Kaili reads:

> *Pue Lamoa banusae.*
>
> *Sadida Pue Pue Lamoa.*
>
> *A ha e e he e [Pue Lamoa*, the Almighty God, be present with us]. (Yunidar 2023:714–715).

According to Yunidar (2023:714–715), the repeated invocation of *Pue Lamoa* expresses a communal petition for the presence and blessing of the supreme divine power before the ritual proceeds. Performed collectively through repetitive vocalisation, the chant reinforces both the solemnity of the ceremony and the participants' shared dependence upon a transcendent authority (Yunidar 2023:714–717).

Beyond its liturgical function, the chant illustrates how oral traditions preserve communal wisdom. Repetition, formulaic language, and collective performance enable moral values, social memory, and ritual identity to be transmitted across generations, while simultaneously strengthening communal cohesion (Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:27–43). Anthropological studies likewise show that *Raego* is embedded within the social life of the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi*, where ritual participation reinforces solidarity and shared cosmological understanding rather than serving merely as artistic performance (Aragon 1996:678–685).

Viewed in this light, the opening chant embodies an important dimension of communal wisdom. It cultivates collective identity, mutual participation, and social continuity through repeated ritual practice, reflecting the biblical understanding of wisdom as the formation of communal life rather than simply the acquisition of individual knowledge (Von Rad 1993:74–89; Waltke 2005:79–112). At the same time, the explicit invocation of *Pue Lamoa* signals a ritual orientation towards sacred mediation that extends beyond communal ethics. This aspect becomes central to the discussion of ritual cosmology in the following section.

Wisdom in harvest chants

Unlike the opening chant, which establishes the ritual setting, *Rego Mpae* accompanies the agricultural cycle and expresses the close relationship between communal labour, gratitude, and cultural memory. Performed during the *Vunja* harvest ceremony, the chant accompanies collective movement around the *vunja* throughout the 3-day celebration. More than ritual accompaniment, it preserves shared understandings of work, thanksgiving, and social responsibility across generations (Ma'ruf 2023; Yunidar 2023).

One harvest chant documented by Yunidar (2023:715) reads:

> *Kajadi pae ri karompaena*
>
> *Damo rabua ri rava tumai*
>
> *Damo mparata malampe rara*
>
> *Kutalu oma rasava mpangale yolo*
>
> *Rapa ngalaka rioma njalibo*
>
> *Matue tuna mpakanaki mbuli*
>
> *Nosese ando lia nupae mpivali*
>
> *Luo palora mpade ntinalu*
>
> *Rapa ngala ka rio ma sadindi*

Yunidar (2023:714–715) translates the chant as follows:

> May the rice flourish again next year. Even if it is scattered on rocky ground, may it continue to grow. May hearts rejoice together. I have cleared the old field. The harvest has been gathered from this garden. The rice cycle begins again. The grain has become beautiful. The field has become wide with rice. I have gathered the fruits from the field.

Rather than celebrating a single harvest, the chant narrates the entire agricultural cycle, from preparing the land and cultivating the fields to gathering the harvest and anticipating the next season. Labour, gratitude, and hope are presented as interconnected communal experiences rather than individual

achievements. The repeated movement between present abundance and future expectation reflects an agrarian worldview in which perseverance and collective responsibility sustain the life of the community.

The poetic structure reinforces this communal wisdom. Through repetition, rhythmic narration, and collective performance, practical knowledge is transmitted in forms that are easily remembered and reenacted within communal life (Ong 1982:36–49; Vansina 1985:39–43). Yunidar (2023) notes that expressions such as *Nosese ando lia nupae mpivali* [Moving and/or dancing together {*signifying*}, this is the rice that has been taken and/ or harvested abundantly {*and multiplied again*}] convey gratitude for an abundant harvest while simultaneously affirming confidence in the community's continued participation in future cultivation. In this way, agricultural knowledge becomes inseparable from moral formation.

Anthropological studies similarly show that harvest rituals in Central Sulawesi reinforce reciprocal relationships, social cohesion, and cultural continuity rather than functioning merely as economic celebrations (Aragon 2000; Bismawati & Tamrin 2025; Poigi et al. 2025). *Rego Mpae* therefore operates simultaneously as ritual performance, communal memory, and moral pedagogy, shaping dispositions of perseverance, cooperation, gratitude, and hope. This formative role resonates with biblical wisdom, which likewise portrays faithful labour, diligence, and communal responsibility as integral to wise living (Pr 6:6–11; 10:4–5; Von Rad 1993:74–89; Waltke 2005:79–112). At the same time, the chant remains embedded within a ritual worldview in which agricultural blessing is associated with sacred mediation, a dimension examined further in the following section.

Wisdom in mourning chants

Whereas *Rego Mpae* celebrates communal labour and gratitude, *Rego Mate* accompanies death and communal mourning. Rather than functioning solely as lament, it provides a ritual space where grief, remembrance, and social solidarity are expressed collectively. Through poetic performance, individual loss is placed within the continuing life of the community, allowing collective memory to be preserved across generations (Stanzah 2018:67–78).

One funeral chant documented in the *Raego* tradition reads:

> *Karampue ri langi* [Lord of Heaven],
>
> *Karampue ri tana* [Lord of Earth],
>
> *Topejadi kami* [Our Creator],
>
> *Nipakabelo mpotupu kami …* [May our lives be blessed and guided toward what is good …] (Yunidar 2023:716–717)

Yunidar (2023:716–717) explains that the repeated references to *Karampue* acknowledge the relationship between humanity, the earth, and the transcendent reality recognised within the Kaili worldview. Rather than presenting death merely as the end of biological life, the chant interprets it within a shared cosmological framework that connects human existence with the sacred.

A close reading suggests that the dominant theme is continuity rather than despair. The poetic language repeatedly shifts attention from the deceased individual to shared origin, communal identity, and enduring belonging. Through formulaic repetition and collective performance, mourning becomes an act of communal remembrance in which cultural memory and moral identity are continually reaffirmed (Ong 1982:38–49; Vansina 1985:39–43).

Recent phenomenological studies likewise observe that expressions such as *Karampue Langi* [Lord of Heaven] and *Karampue Tana* [Lord of Earth] reflect indigenous understandings of the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and transcendent reality rather than functioning as merely poetic symbols (Poigi et al. 2025:108–123). Accordingly, *Rego Mate* serves not only as an expression of grief but also as a vehicle for transmitting communal understandings of death, belonging, and continuity.

Viewed through the lens of wisdom traditions, the chant performs an important pedagogical role by teaching succeeding generations how to remember the dead, sustain communal solidarity, and interpret human life within the continuity of the wider community. These themes resonate with biblical wisdom's concern for memory, faithful relationships, and communal responsibility (Von Rad 1993:74–89; Waltke 2005:79–112). At the same time, the invocation of *Karampue* reveals that the communal wisdom preserved in the chant remains inseparable from a ritual cosmology that will be examined in the following section.

Synthesising *Raego* as communal wisdom

The foregoing analyses demonstrate that *Raego* functions as a tradition of communal wisdom in which moral formation is embodied through ritual performance rather than conveyed as abstract instruction. Across the opening, harvest, and mourning chants, values such as solidarity, gratitude, perseverance, intergenerational continuity, and communal responsibility are transmitted through poetic narration, rhythmic repetition, and collective participation, enabling cultural memory and social identity to be sustained across generations (Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:27–43).

In this respect, *Raego* shares important features with the biblical wisdom tradition, which likewise seeks to shape communal life through practical patterns of faithful living rather than through theoretical knowledge alone (Von Rad 1993:74–89; Waltke 2005:79–112). Such parallels should not be understood as implying theological equivalence. Instead, they highlight the capacity of indigenous oral traditions to preserve moral values that strengthen communal identity and ethical formation.

At the same time, the analysis demonstrates that these wisdom traditions cannot be separated from the ritual framework in which they are performed. The recurring invocations of *Pue Lamoa* [Supreme Deity] and *Karampue* [Divine Being], together with the cosmological assumptions embedded in the chants, indicate that communal wisdom and ritual belief remain closely intertwined (Poigi et al. 2025:108–123; Yunidar 2023:714–717). Any biblical engagement with *Raego* must therefore consider both dimensions. The following section turns to this ritual cosmology and examines its theological implications in greater detail.

Ritual cosmology in *Raego*

The preceding analysis has shown that *Raego* embodies not only communal wisdom but also a ritual worldview expressed through its chants and performances. Recurring invocations of *Pue Lamoa* and *Karampue*, together with ritual language directed towards sacred realities, reveal understandings of divine presence, spiritual mediation, and the relationship between humanity and the sacred that extend beyond moral formation alone (Bell 1997:138–169; Geertz 1973:87–125; Yunidar 2023:714–717). A theological evaluation of *Raego* must therefore consider not only its social and ethical significance but also the ritual cosmology that shapes its meaning and performance.

Sacred invocation

A defining feature of the documented *Raego* chants is the recurring use of sacred invocations that frame ritual performance. Unlike the harvest and mourning chants analysed previously, these opening formulas are directed not primarily to the gathered community but to *Pue Lamoa*, thereby establishing the participants' relationship with the sacred before the ritual proceeds.

One of the best-known opening chants reads:

> *Pue Lamoa banusae*
>
> *Sadida Pue Pue Lamoa*
>
> *A ha e e he e* [*Pue Lamoa*, the Almighty God, be present with us]. (Yunidar 2023:714–715)

Yunidar (2023:714–715) explains that this chant invokes the presence and blessing of *Pue Lamoa* at the beginning of the ceremony. The repeated naming of *Pue Lamoa* therefore functions as more than poetic repetition; it ritually orients the community towards a transcendent authority understood to oversee and bless the communal event.

Ritual theory helps to clarify the significance of this practice. Bell (1997:138–169) argues that ritual language is performative because it establishes relationships with the sacred rather than merely expressing religious ideas, while Geertz (1973:112–125) observes that ritual symbols embody and reinforce a community's worldview. Viewed from this perspective, the invocation of *Pue Lamoa* reflects a ritual cosmology in which communal life is consciously situated before a sacred reality acknowledged through ceremonial speech.

A similar pattern appears in funeral chants that invoke *Karampue* in relation to life, death, and human existence (Poigi et al. 2025:108–123; Yunidar 2023:716–717). Although the names vary according to ritual context, both invocations demonstrate that sacred language is integral to the performative structure of *Raego*. The tradition therefore functions not only as cultural poetry but also as ritual discourse that expresses the community's understanding of the sacred order.

At this stage, these invocations are described rather than evaluated. Their presence demonstrates that *Raego* cannot be understood solely as folklore or communal performance but embodies a ritual cosmology in which sacred invocation forms an essential element of communal participation. This observation leads naturally to the question of spiritual mediation, examined in the following section.

Spiritual mediation

The recurring use of sacred invocations in *Raego* naturally raises questions about spiritual mediation. Ethnographic evidence indicates that *Raego* is more than a sequence of poetic recitations; it forms part of a ritual system in which spoken words, ceremonial actions, and communal participation establish relationships between the human community and the sacred realm (Aragon 2000:245–267; Yunidar 2023:714–717).

The documented chants suggest that invocations of *Pue Lamoa* and *Karampue* function not merely as symbolic expressions but as ritual acts acknowledging a transcendent order within the indigenous cosmology (Poigi et al. 2025: 108–123; Yunidar 2023:714–717). Their significance lies less in literary expression than in their performative role within the ritual itself. As Bell (1997:72–90) notes, ritual speech derives its meaning from its place within a broader pattern of ritual action, while Geertz (1973:112–125) observes that ritual practices both express and sustain a community's religious worldview. In *Raego*, spoken invocations therefore become integral to maintaining the relationship between communal life and sacred order.

This understanding is consistent with wider anthropological discussions of ritual mediation. Hiebert (1984:141–144) argues that many indigenous societies perceive reality as an integrated spiritual universe in which ritual practices mediate relationships between visible and invisible realities. Within such worldviews, distinctions between 'religion' and 'culture' are often inseparable because ritual, morality, and communal life are experienced as parts of a single cosmological order.

Recognising this ritual context is essential for interpreting *Raego* fairly. The question is not whether every

contemporary participant consciously shares the same theological convictions, but whether the documented tradition itself developed within a worldview in which sacred invocation and spiritual mediation were integral to ritual life. The available evidence suggests that it did. This historical and cosmological setting provides the necessary basis for the biblical evaluation developed in the following section.

Cosmological worldview

The ritual language of *Raego* reflects a cosmological worldview in which humanity, nature, the community, and the sacred are understood as an integrated moral order. Recurring invocations of *Pue Lamoa* and *Karampue*, together with ritual expressions associated with agricultural fertility, communal wellbeing, and death, indicate that these dimensions are not experienced as separate spheres, but as mutually related realities sustained through ritual performance (Aragon 2000:245–267; Yunidar 2023:714–717).

Anthropological scholarship has long recognised that ritual traditions function as symbolic systems through which communities interpret reality and reproduce their understanding of the world. Geertz (1973:89–125) argues that religion provides models through which people perceive and interpret reality, while Bell (1997:138–169) emphasises that ritual practices continually embody and reinforce those understandings. *Raego* illustrates this dynamic by transmitting its cosmological vision through repeated communal performance rather than formal doctrinal instruction (Hiebert, Shaw & Tiénou 2024:283).

Recent studies likewise suggest that references to *Karampue*, the earth, agricultural fertility, and communal life should not be understood merely as poetic imagery. Instead, they express an integrated worldview in which human well-being depends upon harmony among the community, the natural environment, and the transcendent realm (Poigi et al. 2025:108–123). This cosmological orientation helps to explain why *Raego* continues to function as more than a cultural performance, remaining a meaningful framework through which identity, memory, and communal life are interpreted.

Recognising this worldview is essential for theological engagement. The issue is not whether every contemporary participant consciously shares all the cosmological assumptions reflected in the tradition, but that the documented chants developed within a ritual universe where communal wisdom, sacred invocation, and cosmological belief formed an integrated whole. Any biblical response to *Raego* must therefore evaluate the tradition within this broader worldview rather than isolating individual ritual elements from the system of meaning that gives them significance. This provides the foundation for the biblical response developed in the following section (Hiebert, Shaw & Tiénou 2024:45).

Synthesis

The preceding discussion demonstrates that the communal wisdom embodied in *Raego* cannot be separated from the ritual cosmology within which it is expressed. Sacred invocation, spiritual mediation, and cosmological belief together provide the ritual framework through which moral values, communal identity, and collective memory are preserved among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities (Aragon 2000:245–267; Yunidar 2023:714–717). Consequently, the theological challenge presented by *Raego* lies not in its communal wisdom itself, but in the ritual worldview that gives this wisdom its religious meaning. This distinction provides the foundation for the following section, which evaluates *Raego* through biblical theology and the framework of critical contextualisation.

A biblical response to *Raego*

The analyses presented above indicate that *Raego* cannot be understood solely as an expression of indigenous culture. Its documented chants preserve important forms of communal wisdom while simultaneously reflecting a ritual cosmology expressed through sacred invocation and spiritual mediation. This dual character calls for careful theological discernment. Rather than rejecting or embracing *Raego* wholesale rejection or uncritical acceptance, Christian engagement should evaluate its cultural and ritual dimensions in light of Scripture through the framework of critical contextualisation (Bevans 2002:15–21; Hiebert 1984:104–112).

Raego and communal moral formation

The documented *Raego* chants reveal that the tradition plays a significant role in communal moral formation. Through ritual participation, oral repetition, and collective memory, it cultivates solidarity, gratitude, perseverance, mutual responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. These virtues are transmitted not through abstract instruction but through shared practices that shape the community's moral imagination (Ong 1982:31–49; Vansina 1985:27–43).

From a biblical perspective, such values should not be dismissed simply because they are preserved within an indigenous ritual tradition. Scripture consistently affirms communal responsibility, faithful labour, gratitude, and the intergenerational transmission of wisdom (Dt 6:4–9; Pr 1:1–7; 22:6). Likewise, the wisdom tradition of Proverbs presents wisdom as practical instruction that forms character and nurtures faithful relationships within the covenant community (Longman III 2006:31–48; Waltke 2005:79–112). In this respect, the communal virtues embodied in *Raego* provide meaningful points of contact through which biblical teaching may engage indigenous communities without disregarding their cultural heritage.

Critical contextualisation offers an appropriate framework for making this distinction. Rather than rejecting cultural traditions because of their historical origins, Hiebert

(1984:104–112) argues that Christian communities should discern which cultural forms may be retained and which religious meanings require transformation in light of Scripture. A similar conclusion emerges from the recent study of the Kaili healing tradition of *Balia*, where the principal theological concern lies not in the tradition's communal or therapeutic functions but in its claims regarding spiritual mediation and ritual authority (Depparua et al. 2026). The same principle applies to *Raego*. Its communal virtues may be affirmed, while its ritual meanings require further theological evaluation.

Biblical engagement with *Raego* should therefore begin with appreciation before moving to evaluation. Recognising values such as solidarity, gratitude, diligence, and mutual care does not compromise biblical faith; rather, it reflects the responsibility to discern cultural expressions in the light of God's revelation. At the same time, these communal virtues cannot be considered in isolation from the ritual cosmology within which they are embedded, making theological discernment indispensable.

Spiritual mediation and theological discernment

While the communal values embodied in *Raego* may be affirmed, its documented chants also preserve ritual elements that require theological discernment. As the preceding discussion has shown, invocations directed to *Pue Lamoa* and *Karampue* are embedded within a ritual cosmology in which communal wellbeing is understood in relation to sacred realities (Aragon 2000:245–267; Yunidar 2023:714–717). The central theological issue, therefore, is not the preservation of indigenous culture itself but the role of spiritual mediation within the ritual tradition.

The New Testament locates mediation between God and humanity exclusively in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Christ is the sole mediator between God and humanity (Tm 1 2:5), and through his once-for-all priestly ministry believers are granted direct access to God (Heb 4:14–16; 9:11–15). Christian worship is thus grounded in God's gracious self-revelation in Christ rather than in ritual acts intended to secure access to the sacred.

This biblical affirmation does not require the wholesale rejection of *Raego*. Cultural traditions often survive after their original religious meanings have changed, and contemporary participants may no longer attach identical significance to every ritual expression. Even so, where sacred invocations continue to express dependence upon spiritual powers or imply forms of mediation apart from Christ, theological evaluation becomes necessary. Hiebert (1984:186–191) therefore argues that critical contextualisation requires Christian communities to evaluate the worldview underlying cultural practices rather than merely accepting or rejecting their outward forms.

Recent evangelical reflection on indigenous ritual traditions in Indonesia reaches a similar conclusion. Studies of both the Kaili healing tradition of *Balia* (Depparua et al. 2026) and the Pamona reconciliation tradition of *Giwu* (Sunkudon et al. 2025) argue that the principal theological concern lies not in the communal or social functions preserved by indigenous traditions, but in ritual meanings related to spiritual mediation, religious authority, and theological allegiance. *Raego* presents a comparable challenge. Its communal and moral contributions may be appreciated, yet ritual elements that imply alternative forms of mediation require careful theological assessment because they bear directly upon Christian confession concerning worship, revelation, and the unique mediatorial work of Christ.

Theological engagement with *Raego* should therefore not be framed as a choice between preserving culture and defending doctrine. Instead, it calls for discerning which ritual meanings may continue as cultural expressions and which should be reinterpreted or relinquished to remain faithful to the biblical witness that Christ alone is the mediator between God and humanity.

Critical contextual discernment

The preceding discussion indicates that neither uncritical acceptance nor wholesale rejection provides an adequate Christian response to *Raego*. Because the tradition embodies both communal wisdom and ritual cosmology, it requires theological discernment that takes its cultural significance seriously while evaluating its underlying worldview in the light of Scripture. This approach reflects Hiebert's model of *critical contextualisation*, which calls Christian communities to examine indigenous traditions under biblical authority while respecting their historical and cultural integrity (Hiebert 1984:104–112).

Applied to *Raego*, such discernment begins by affirming those communal values that foster solidarity, gratitude, perseverance, mutual responsibility, and intergenerational continuity. These values constitute meaningful points of contact through which biblical teaching may engage local communities in culturally intelligible ways (Bevans 2002: 15–21). At the same time, ritual meanings involving sacred invocation, spiritual mediation, and cosmological assumptions must be evaluated in the light of Scripture. The question is therefore not whether *Raego* should be preserved or rejected as a whole, but which elements may continue as cultural expressions and which require reinterpretation or discontinuation because they are incompatible with the gospel (Th 1 5:21–22; Smith 2009).

Such discernment is most appropriately undertaken within the life of the local church rather than imposed from outside. Hiebert (1984:104–112) argues that believers themselves should participate in examining their cultural traditions under the authority of Scripture. This communal process enables churches to distinguish more carefully between cultural identity and spiritual allegiance, thereby avoiding both cultural alienation and theological accommodation.

Critical contextualisation therefore does not erase indigenous identity, nor does it legitimise every element of indigenous tradition. Instead, it equips the church to affirm what is consistent with biblical revelation while transforming or relinquishing ritual meanings that compromise the gospel. In this way, Christian communities may remain both culturally rooted and faithfully centred on Christ.

Pastoral and contextual implications

The findings of this study carry important implications for pastoral ministry and contextual theology in Indonesia. Rather than treating *Raego* simply as cultural heritage to be preserved or as a ritual practice to be rejected, churches are called to engage the tradition through careful theological discernment. Because *Raego* embodies both communal wisdom and ritual cosmology, faithful engagement requires appreciation of its cultural significance while evaluating its underlying worldview in the light of Scripture.

Pastorally, this begins by recognising the communal virtues preserved within *Raego*. The documented chants cultivate solidarity, gratitude, perseverance, mutual responsibility, and intergenerational continuity, values that resonate with biblical teaching on life within the covenant community. These cultural resources provide meaningful points of contact for Christian discipleship without diminishing the authority of Scripture (Bevans 2002:15–21; Hiebert 1984: 104–112). At the same time, ritual meanings associated with sacred invocation and spiritual mediation require careful theological evaluation (Fitriani, Sunkudon & Santoso 2025). As this study has argued, the central issue is not indigenous culture itself, but the worldview expressed through particular ritual practices. Similar conclusions have been reached in recent evangelical research on the Kaili healing tradition of *Balia*, where the principal theological concern likewise centres on ritual mediation rather than the tradition's communal or therapeutic functions (Depparua et al. 2026).

More broadly, this study contributes to contextual theology by demonstrating that indigenous oral traditions cannot be reduced to simple categories of acceptance or rejection. They often preserve moral wisdom, communal identity, and historical memory while simultaneously expressing religious worldviews that require biblical discernment. In this respect, critical contextualisation provides a constructive framework because it enables local churches to evaluate their own cultural traditions under the authority of Scripture rather than relying solely on external judgements (Bevans 2002: 15–21; Hiebert 1984:104–112; Igboin 2023:3; Rumbay et al. 2023).

Finally, this study highlights the value of indigenous oral traditions as theological resources for evangelical scholarship. The close reading of documented *Raego* chants demonstrates that integrating oral tradition studies, ethnographic research, and biblical theology can deepen understanding of how communities preserve moral values, construct identity, and interpret spiritual reality. Similar interdisciplinary approaches may contribute to future studies of indigenous traditions throughout Indonesia.

Ultimately, the church's calling is neither to preserve culture uncritically nor to reject it indiscriminately. Rather, it is to engage cultural traditions with theological wisdom, biblical discernment, and confidence in the sufficiency of Christ. Through critical contextualisation, traditions such as *Raego* may become opportunities for faithful gospel witness within the cultural communities where God has placed his people.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Raego* among the *To Kaili* and *To Kulawi* communities is more than a cultural performance or ritual folklore. A close reading of documented *Raego* chants shows that the tradition simultaneously embodies communal wisdom and ritual cosmology. While the chants preserve values such as solidarity, gratitude, perseverance, and intergenerational continuity, they also express sacred invocations and forms of spiritual mediation that reflect an indigenous religious worldview. *Raego* should therefore be understood as an integrated cultural tradition in which moral formation and ritual belief are closely intertwined.

On this basis, the study argues that faithful Christian engagement requires neither uncritical acceptance nor wholesale rejection. Instead, biblical discernment should affirm those communal values consistent with Scripture while evaluating ritual meanings through the framework of critical contextualisation. In this way, churches may remain rooted in their cultural context without compromising the biblical witness to Christ as the sole mediator between God and humanity.

This study further contributes to contextual theology by demonstrating how close textual analysis of indigenous oral traditions can be integrated with ethnographic research and biblical theology. More broadly, it shows that documented oral traditions constitute valuable theological resources for understanding the relationship between Scripture, culture, and Christian discipleship. Future research may extend this approach to other indigenous traditions in Indonesia, thereby strengthening evangelical contextual theology through sustained dialogue between biblical revelation and local cultural communities.

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Competing interests

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CRediT authorship contribution

Karel M. Siahaya: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Supervision, Writing – original draft. Weldemina Yudit Tiwery: Data curation, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Validation. Pieter G.O. Sunkudon: Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, 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.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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