

Christianity and Culture: A Study of the Encounter of Christianity and Culture in the Development of Church History in Tanah Kisar

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Abstract

This study aims to reconstruct the historical and theological process of Gospel dissemination and the interaction between Christianity and local culture in Tanah Kisar. The research uses a historical method combined with social and theological approaches. Data were collected through literature review, archival research, and in-depth interviews with local traditional leaders, religious figures, and youth. The analysis involved source criticism and data interpretation, which were then compiled into a descriptive-analytical historiography. The findings reveal that the spread of the Gospel in Kisar occurred through five main historical periods, beginning with the Portuguese Catholic mission and evolving into the growth of the Protestant Church of Maluku under local leadership. The spread of Christianity was deeply influenced by colonial socio-political dynamics, often resulting in nominal Christian communities with limited spiritual transformation. The study also highlights that local culture, particularly the indigenous language, plays a vital role in evangelism. The church's tendency to detach from local culture has hindered the process of inculturation. Therefore, revitalizing local culture through contextual approaches is seen as essential to strengthen the presence of an authentic Christian faith within the Kisar community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Christianity and culture are two inseparable entities in the reality of human life, especially Christians. Christianity as a religion based on the proclamation of the Gospel does not exist in an empty social space. The Gospel always comes into the midst of a society that already has a certain cultural system, and in that context, Christianity must dialogue and acculturate with local culture (Halawa & Bambang, 2024). Since the beginning of the spread of the Gospel, local culture has not only been a place to stand, but also a vehicle for expressing, interpreting, and living the Christian faith in the real context of people's lives.

As stated by missiology thinkers such as (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2010) that culture is not just a traditional heritage, but a shared knowledge system that regulates the behavior and interaction of society. Culture transmits values, norms, language, symbols, and traditions that become guidelines for life for a community. In this context, Christianity cannot be applied abstractly and universally without touching and appreciating the cultural structure of the local community. Therefore, throughout the history of Christian missions, culture has always been an important factor that greatly determines the success or failure of an evangelistic mission.

Kisar Island, as one of the areas in the southern part of the Maluku Islands, is a concrete example of the encounter between Christianity and culture. According to historical records, the Gospel began to be broadcast on this island in 1684, although the Dutch colonial presence in this region had been going on since the mid-17th century. Before the Christian mission entered, the Kisar community already had a mature cultural system, based on customs, regional languages (Meher language), and a strong communal value system. The traditional language is not only used in daily communication, but is also an important means in traditional ceremonies such as marriage, birth, death, and in building peace and social cooperation.

The presence of the Gospel in Kisar brought new light to the lives of the people, but did not immediately replace or erase local culture. In fact, in the early stages of church development, local cultural elements, especially traditional languages, were valued and integrated into church life. For example, in the 1990s, a British missionary translated the Bible into Meher, as an effort to make the proclamation of the Gospel more easily and meaningfully accepted by all levels of Kisar society.

However, in the subsequent development of church history, there was a change in attitude towards local culture. The church, under the influence of modernism and the development of more exclusive denominations, began to view local culture, including traditional languages, in a negative light. Cultural dysfunction, especially traditional languages, is one of the real symptoms of efforts to 'purify' Christian practices from elements considered syncretic. The church emphasizes doctrinal and ritual uniformity, rather than contextual dialogue that values culture as a partner in the proclamation of the Gospel. This attitude leads to what is called "imported Christianity", namely Christianity that is detached from the historical, social, and cultural roots of the society in which it is present.

The tendency of the contemporary church to separate Christianity from local culture shows a crisis of theological reflection. As criticized by contextual theologians, the gospel should not erase culture, but rather change it from within through gracious judgment (Soetarman, Sairin, & Rakhmat, 1992). Christianity, if it wants to be relevant and impactful, must live in culture as a resident guest—not destroying, but enriching and transforming. Living Christianity is Christianity that is able to dialogue with culture, explore local wisdom, and affirm the noble values that have long lived in society.

In this context, it is important to reflect back on the encounter between Christianity and culture in Kisar, as an integral part of the history of church development. This reflection is not only to understand the dynamics of the past, but also as a basis for building relevant theology and contextual practice in the present. Culture should not be seen as a burden or obstacle, but as a gift from God that can be used to express the Kingdom of God on earth.

Several studies related to the inculturation of Christianity and culture include those written by Tari (2018) who analyzed Tongkonan theology in the context of Toraja culture. The main problem raised is the challenge in integrating Christian theology and faith acculturative into Toraja culture, especially through the Tongkonan culture which is the identity of the community. The purpose of the study is to show how theology can be developed in the context of Toraja culture by conducting a critical dialogue between the Gospel and culture, so that a deep and effective understanding is created in building peace and friendliness. The results concluded that theology in the context of Toraja culture must take place continuously through an honest and creative acculturation process, so that Tongkonan culture can be re-understood and interpreted in a new way according to the norms of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, this process is able to produce cultural transformation towards the creation of peace and friendliness which is a symbol of the success of the integration of the gospel and local culture.

Furthermore, Abialtar, Sabaritno, & Tandirerung (2023) identified the existence of the Aluk Todolo death rite which was considered contrary to Christian teachings by evangelists and local church institutions, without any official dialogue to harmonize the two. The purpose of this study is to find the meaning and value of the death ritual through a theological-anthropological approach, and to find common ground and common ground that can be a bridge for interreligious and cultural dialogue, so that society can live harmoniously in diversity. The results of the study show that the Aluk Todolo death rite is a meaningful meeting place between local traditions and Christianity, and through Knitter's mutuality model and Tillich's correlation, it was found that both have complementary foundations. This encounter opens up opportunities for constructive dialogue, strengthens tolerance, and enriches the understanding of faith and the cultural richness of the Mamasa community.

Finally, Maeja, Kii, Mali, Widiatmoko, & Sriwahyuni, (2024) explored views related to Christ from a cultural perspective. This study raises the main issue of integrating Indonesian culture, especially Toraja culture, with the teachings of the Gospel of Jesus Christ without changing the existing culture. The aim is to introduce Christ in the context of Toraja culture through inculturation theology, adapting Christ's teachings to local beliefs such as Marapu. The results of the study indicate that death ceremonies and creation stories in Toraja culture can be effective means of introducing Christ, and emphasize the importance of understanding and respecting culture in the evangelism process.

From the previous research, it is concluded that the inculturation of Christianity in the context of local culture is a theological effort to build a critical and mutually enriching dialogue between the Gospel and culture. This is not seen as a barrier to faith, but as a means that can be creatively reinterpreted in the light of Christ. This process emphasizes the importance of an honest, open, and contextual approach so that Christianity can be lived deeply without eliminating cultural identity. Thus, inculturation enables cultural transformation that strengthens Gospel values such as peace, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

Therefore, this study is here to explore and analyze more deeply the historical and theological relationship between Christianity and culture in the context of Kisar society. This study will highlight how local culture becomes an important partner in the development of the church, how indigenous languages play a role in the proclamation of the Gospel, and how today's church can be wiser and contextual in responding to the challenges of social change and globalization.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research method used in this scientific work is a historical research method combined with a social and theological approach. Historical research was chosen because the author wanted to systematically and objectively reconstruct past events related to the encounter between Christianity and culture in Tanah Kisar. This approach is in line with the opinions of experts such as Supriatna (2006) and Usman & Akbar (2009) who emphasize that historical research aims to understand past events scientifically to get a complete picture of the background and social and cultural dynamics that occurred. In this context, historical research is combined with a social approach to reveal social phenomena and cultural practices that arise from human interaction (Maryati, 2008). Meanwhile, a theological approach is used to provide a reflection of Christian faith on the findings produced, so that the results of the study are not only academic, but also spiritual.

The research process was carried out through several systematic stages. First, the heuristic stage, namely collecting primary and secondary sources that are relevant to the topic, such as historical documents, books, archives, and other library materials. Second,

the verification stage, namely assessing the authenticity and validity of the sources that have been obtained. Third, the interpretation stage, namely interpreting historical facts and social phenomena found in order to obtain a complete scientific understanding of past events. Finally, the historiography stage, where the findings are arranged narratively and analytically to produce a scientific work of social history. The research location was focused on Kisar Island, especially at the GPM Imanuel Wonreli Congregation and the Kisar Islands Classis Office. Data collection techniques included literature studies at the STT INTIM Makassar library, archival research at the Classic Office, and in-depth interviews with three main informant groups, namely traditional elders (saniri), young men and women, and religious figures.

In analyzing and interpreting the data, the author uses the source criticism and interpretation method. Source criticism is carried out to assess the authenticity and credibility of the data obtained, both in the form of written documents and interview results. Interpretation is carried out to understand the meaning behind the historical facts and social phenomena in the context of Christianity and the culture of the Kisar community. The theological approach is used in this stage to provide meaning to faith in the results of the study, with the aim of aligning historical, social, and spiritual aspects. The writing of this scientific paper is carried out using the analytical descriptive method, namely presenting facts and conditions as they are in detail, then analyzing them in depth to reveal the factors underlying the relationship between Christianity and local culture, and their impact on the social life of the community, including the problem of dysfunctionality of the traditional language in the Maahury family.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. RESULTS

From the process of inculturation of the Gospel and the spread of Christianity in Tanah Kisar, there are several important things that are discussed in depth in this study. Explicitly, there are 3 important things that are elaborated, namely (1) the history of the spread of Christianity, (2) the context of the spread, and (3) the relationship between religion and local culture in Tanah Kisar. The spread of Christianity in Tanah Kisar is a historical process that has been going on since the 17th century through the influence of the Dutch missionary mission that brought the teachings of the Gospel to this region, and since then Christianity has continued to grow until it became the majority religion among the local community. In the context of its spread, the presence of Christianity cannot be separated from the socio-political conditions of the colonial era and the involvement of local kingdoms that had relations with the Dutch, which also influenced the community's acceptance of the new religion. Over time, the interaction between Christianity and local culture formed a mutually influential relationship, where some cultural elements were accommodated in the life of faith, such as the use of the Kisar language in worship, the involvement of traditional rites in church ceremonies, and local symbols in religious expression; but on the other hand, there was also a rejection of certain cultural elements that were considered to be contrary to the principles of Christian faith. Thus, the development of Christianity in Tanah Kisar not only shows the success of the evangelism mission, but also illustrates the process of contextualization of faith that is deeply rooted in the social and cultural realities of the local community.

3.2.DISCUSSION

History of the Spread of Christianity and Tana Kisar

Period 1540–1605: In this period, Christianity in Indonesia began with a mission carried out by the Catholic Church, which came through the Portuguese and the Spanish. This mission was marked by the introduction of Christianity in new areas in Indonesia, including Maluku, where Portuguese influence was very pronounced *Period 1605–1816:* The church in Maluku passed under the care of the VOC Church until the end of the 18th century. This period reflects the dynamics of European politics that influenced Christian missions, as the government established relations with the church to gain support for mission efforts *Period 1816–1864:* Kam, a pastor representing the Indonesian Protestant Church, is evangelizing remote islands. However, many of the congregation are nominally Christian, and this situation illustrates the challenges faced in many contexts *Period 1864–1935:* During this period, the Protestant Church organization developed after the NZG stopped cooperation in the Eastern Indonesia region. This provided an opportunity for indigenous congregations to take a greater role in the church *Period 1935 to present:* The development of the Maluku Protestant Church was accelerated by the circumstances arising from World War II, in which Dutch pastors were arrested, and church leadership began to be held by native pastors.

The Context of the Spread of Christianity in Tanah Kisar

The historical background of the spread of Christianity in Tanah Kisar began with the arrival of the Catholic church mission in 1600. This mission was inseparable from the efforts of the Portuguese who came from East Timor to search for their heritage. In this process, they tried to introduce Christianity to the Kisar community through the religious symbols they had. The Kisar community began to understand Christianity through church symbols as a manifestation of faith in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the development of Protestant Christian religious broadcasting in Kisar was initiated by cooperation between the country's leaders and the VOC (Dutch) government which brought teachers and pastors from the Banda Neira Islands at the request of the village leaders. In this era, children from the nobility began to be taught to read and write Malay, with the hope that they could become partners in cooperation with the Company. This made the Gospel begin to have a place in the hearts of the Kisar people.

However, despite these efforts, the spread of Christianity during the VOC era did not result in a significant renewal of faith for the Kisar community. The condition of the community which was still oppressed by the paternalistic political style of the Company resulted in many ordinary people remaining in a state of oppression and not receiving adequate education. Many people who had claimed to be Christians were still trapped in a state of disbelief.

Overall, the process of spreading Christianity in Tanah Kisar took place in the context of a struggle against existing social and political conditions, where the mission was not always successful in improving the spiritual life of the community. Each of these periods shows how social, political, and cultural dynamics interacted with the development of Christianity in Tanah Kisar, as well as the challenges faced by the church in reaching a community rich in local culture.

The Relationship between Christianity and Culture

Christianity does not stand alone but interacts with existing local cultures. Culture serves as a foundation in understanding and accepting Christian teachings. Traditional

languages are vital communication tools that reflect the identity of the Kisar community.

1. **The Challenge of Separation of Church and Culture:** Over time, there has been a tendency in the church to distance itself from culture, which is seen as negative in many contexts. This attitude can hinder the church from reaching culturally rich communities.
2. **The Role of Language in Evangelism:** Language is recognized as the primary tool for evangelism, but many attempts to use Malay in evangelism in Kisar have failed because the language is not understood by the indigenous people. This shows the importance of local languages in effective communication.
3. **Revitalization of Local Culture:** This document also emphasizes the need to revitalize indigenous cultures and languages to remain relevant and functional in the contemporary context, and to avoid dysfunctional attitudes towards regional languages or local cultural elements.

Christianity does not develop in a vacuum, but is always present and grows in a certain cultural context. In the context of the Kisar community, local culture including values, symbols, rituals, and especially traditional languages become lenses or means to understand and accept Christian teachings. Culture provides categories of thinking, social structures, and emotional expressions used by the community in receiving the Gospel. For example, the Kisar traditional language is not only a means of communication, but also a marker of identity and ancestral heritage. When Christianity blends with local culture, the Gospel can be conveyed and interpreted more deeply, because it is in direct contact with the lives and understanding of the community. This supports the concept of "inculturation", which is a process in which the Christian faith takes root in a particular culture without losing its authenticity, and on the contrary, the culture is enriched by the values of the Gospel. There is[un in-depth discussion with the above findings as follows;

The Challenge of Separation of Church and Culture

In the history of church growth, especially in mission areas such as Kisar, there has often been a tendency to separate Christianity from local culture. Local culture is sometimes considered contrary to the values of the Gospel or is labeled as pagan, primitive, or immoral. This encourages the church to "cleanse" cultural elements from religious practices. However, this attitude can actually hinder the church from reaching and empowering local communities. When culture is ignored or belittled, people can feel alienated from the church, or consider Christianity a foreign religion. As a result, the church can lose its closeness to the realities of people's lives and fail to convey the Gospel message contextually (Belwawin, Parinusa, & Labene, 2025). In the context of Kisar, this separation can result in the loss of cultural language and symbols in liturgy, songs, or celebrations of faith. Therefore, the church needs to review its attitude towards culture, and open up a healthy dialogue between faith and local culture.

The Role of Language in Evangelism

Language is the main tool in conveying the gospel message because effective language can touch the hearts, minds, and feelings of people. In the context of Kisar, many evangelism efforts using Malay - the official language or lingua franca - have not been effective. This is because most people do not master the language in depth, or do not feel emotionally close to it. This failure shows that regional languages have a crucial role in the success of gospel communication. Regional languages not only convey information, but also carry rich cultural meanings. Therefore, effective evangelism must use the mother tongue of the community, so that the gospel message is not only understood cognitively, but also experienced existentially (Banga, Kabanga, & Tabuni,

2023). In line with Mateus (2017) in his research, he revealed that the biggest challenge in evangelism is language, therefore a cultural approach needs to be used so that the gospel can be understood by the community. Thus, the church needs to encourage the use of local languages in liturgy, teaching, and hymns, and support the translation of the Bible into the Kisar language.

Revitalization of Local Culture

In facing the challenges of modernity and globalization, local cultures and indigenous languages are increasingly marginalized. Many young generations are starting to lose their mother tongue skills and no longer understand the cultural symbols inherited from their ancestors. Sarang & Jiaripits (2025) stated that changes and shifts in cultural values are influenced by several factors including cultural modernization-globalization and the transmission of cultural knowledge by indigenous elders. The same thing was also explained by PRT, Paramma & Kabanga (2021) that changes in cultural identity are influenced by new experiences with the urbanization of local residents due to various demands such as economy and education. This not only has an impact on cultural identity, but also on the spiritual life of the community. Revitalization of indigenous culture and language is an important action to maintain the sustainability of local identity and spirituality.

Revitalization does not mean blindly returning to the past but trying to actualize cultural values in a contemporary context, making them relevant in the life of the church and society today. The church has an important role in this process. Through contextual liturgy, culture-based Christian education, and respect for local wisdom, the church can encourage people not to be dysfunctional or demean their cultural heritage. Sahureka & Parinussa (2023) explained that the growth of the church today is also influenced by the integration of local culture such as language, clothing, and music into the liturgy of worship. Ethnic nuances of worship can unite and develop the quality of worship. So that local culture can be a fertile place to grow authentic and contextual faith.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the process of spreading the Gospel in Tanah Kisar cannot be separated from local historical, socio-political, and cultural dynamics. *First*, historically, the spread of Christianity in Tanah Kisar took place through several important periods that reflected changes in actors and evangelism strategies, starting from the Portuguese-Spanish Catholic mission, the influence of the VOC, to the role of the indigenous church after World War II. Each period showed its own challenges, including the limitations of spiritual influence amidst political pressure and colonial social structures. *Second*, the context of the spread of Christianity in Kisar shows that despite missionary efforts from outsiders, the success of evangelism is highly dependent on cooperation with local leaders, the use of language that is understood by the community, and the suitability of Gospel values to the reality of people's lives. However, there are still many challenges in building authentic faith because of the distance between the influence of the mission and the community's understanding of Christian teachings. *Third*, the success of the inculturation of the Gospel is closely related to respect for local culture. The traditional language, cultural symbols, and social practices of the Kisar community play an important role in bridging the proclamation of the Gospel. However, the church's attitude that tends to separate itself from culture has hampered this process. Therefore, the church needs to reflect back on the role of culture as a vessel of faith, encourage the use of local languages in the liturgy, and be actively involved in the revitalization of local culture so that the proclamation of the Gospel truly touches the lives of the community.

Thus, Christianity in Tanah Kisar does not grow in a cultural vacuum, but rather through a dynamic inculturation process, where the Gospel is rooted in local culture, and local culture is enriched by Christian values. The contemporary church in Kisar is expected to continue to develop a contextual, participatory approach that values cultural identity as part of the growth of the people's faith.

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