MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL

Forum Kajian Pendidikan Keagamaan NTT
Jalan Elt Tari, KM 9, Desa Naiola, Kecamatan Bikomi Selatan, Kefamenanu
Home Page: https://multidisciplinaryjournal.ejurnal.org/index.php/mdj

OPEN ACCESS

From Sacred Springs to Living Waters: A Christological Interpretation of the Kuru We Fohon Tradition in Renrua Village

Anselmus Yata Mones
Sekolah Tinggi Pastoral Santo Petrus Keuskupan Atambua
monesanselmus@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the *Kuru We Fohon* tradition practiced by the people of Renrua Village, a ritual involving the collection of sacred water as an expression of gratitude and petition for divine grace. The research employs a qualitative inductive method to examine the cultural and theological dimensions of this ancestral ritual. Findings indicate that *Kuru We Fohon* is not merely a symbolic activity but a deeply embedded spiritual practice that reflects the community's understanding of nature, tradition, and the divine. Despite the presence of formal Christian teachings, the ritual remains central to the community's religious life and is interpreted in light of Christological teachings, particularly the image of Jesus as the source of living water. This integration demonstrates a contextual theology in which traditional practices are not rejected but reinterpreted as meaningful expressions of Christian faith. The study affirms that indigenous rituals can serve as vital pathways for theological reflection, faith formation, and cultural identity. Through *Kuru We Fohon*, the people of Renrua articulate a vision of spiritual life that is grounded in local wisdom and enriched by theological insight.

Keywords: Kuru We Fohon, Living Water, Inculturation, Ritual Tradition, Christology.

Introduction

Human beings are intrinsically connected to the physical world in which they live. They do not exist in isolation but depend on mutual relationships for personal growth and fulfillment. This inherent interdependence has continuously influenced the development of human civilization. Within this context, culture and society are closely intertwined, as culture cannot be sustained without society and society remains incomplete without culture (Janu, 2007).

As explained by Koentjaraningrat (1996), culture encompasses the entire system of ideas, feelings, actions, and artifacts generated by humans within the framework of social life. Consequently, every human behavior that arises within social interaction is considered cultural, since individuals acquire and internalize such behavior over time. Liliweri (2001) elaborates that culture involves symbols, meanings, imagination, value systems, social norms, and patterns of

communication shared and transmitted within a group. These elements represent a collective consciousness and serve to shape behavioral norms and conventions. Saifuddin (2006) underscores that modern anthropology affirms the dynamic interplay between social behavior and ritual forms, where meaning is generated through lived experience.

Through shared experiences, human communities develop customs, traditions, and social systems. Although traditions evolve over time, their core elements are preserved and assimilated into contemporary practices. Culture, therefore, should not be regarded as a static legacy, but as a living narrative that continuously transforms and renews itself. Individuals simultaneously inherit, adapt, and transmit cultural expressions, thereby maintaining continuity across generations (Sujarweni, 2014). Ray (2018) also notes that sacred traditions often persist through symbolic practices that reflect communal memory and identity.

Cultural systems are formed through commitments to social values such as interdependence, collective responsibility, and solidarity. Culture is not only manifested in outward rituals but also reflects internalized convictions and beliefs. For the people of Renrua, such traditions carry religious significance. Their understanding of Jesus as the source of living water is expressed through cultural symbols that emerge in ritual practices. These expressions of faith do not conflict with religious doctrine but serve as concrete channels through which theological truths are made present in daily life (Oliver, 2022).

The Renrua community, located in the Raimanuk District of Belu Regency, observes a longstanding tradition known as Kuru We Fohon, which refers to the drawing of sacred water. This practice, inherited across generations, is a core aspect of their cultural heritage. For this community, Kuru We Fohon is more than a ceremonial act; it is a sacred obligation rooted in ancestral beliefs and a reflection of social identity (Thinane, 2023). Despite the introduction of Christianity in the region, the people of Renrua have continued this practice as a form of gratitude and reverence (McNabb & DeVito, 2022).

The Kuru We Fohon ceremony represents a profound synthesis of natural elements and spiritual meaning. It consists of a series of ritual stages including guest invitation (katak ema), communal celebration featuring traditional dances (likurai, tebe, haksoke), the retrieval of sacred water by appointed warriors (meo), and the final offerings conducted within the ancestral house (uma lulik). These ritual stages illustrate how the physical act of drawing water is integrated with metaphysical aspirations for blessings. They also affirm the enduring significance of traditional

figures such as clan leaders and elders, who maintain authority over ritual proceedings (Sewapo, 2022).

Within anthropological discourse, this tradition may be interpreted as part of humanity's broader effort to articulate meaning through symbolic action. As suggested by Fuad Hassan, every culture functions as a referential system that affirms group identity and sustains social cohesion (Sarinah, 2012). Cultural diversity, in this regard, does not lead to fragmentation but fosters social harmony (Andaya, 2016). Thus, the variety of cultural forms exemplified by Kuru We Fohon complements religious truth by expressing spirituality that is embedded in communal life (Palmer, 2019).

The people of Renrua regard sacred water not merely as a physical necessity but as a medium of spiritual communication. The water retrieved during the ritual is believed to contain ancestral blessings and divine favor. This belief is manifested through ceremonial dialogues such as the exchange between the water bearers and the clan leader. The sacred water is then preserved in specific vessels and placed in the uma lulik alongside other sacred symbols. These practices reflect the community's ability to harmonize traditional cosmology with Christian theology through the process of inculturation (de Jonge, 2022).

In Christian theology, water has always carried profound spiritual meaning. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself as the source of living water, a metaphor that signifies eternal life and divine grace (John 4:10–14). This theological symbolism corresponds with the local understanding of We Fohon as a source of vitality, strength, and blessing. The belief that sacred water brings prosperity and well-being aligns with the Christian affirmation of Christ as the giver of spiritual sustenance (Zheng & Budiraharjo, 2024).

Viewing the Kuru We Fohon tradition through a Christological perspective enables a constructive dialogue between faith and culture. Rather than replacing traditional practices, Christian teachings resonate with them. The community's continued observance of Kuru We Fohon serves as a lived theology, grounded in local wisdom and reaffirmed through collective memory. This synthesis of indigenous spirituality and Christian doctrine embodies a contextual theology that respects cultural identity while affirming religious commitment (Stinton, 2024).

Given the integration of cultural and theological elements, it is crucial to examine how traditional rituals such as Kuru We Fohon function as expressions of indigenous heritage and as contextual embodiments of Christian belief. This study aims to explore the religious significance

of the Kuru We Fohon procession for the people of Renrua, particularly in its ability to convey theological meaning through symbolic and ritual practices. By analyzing the cultural framework, ritual components, and theological interpretations embedded within this tradition, the research seeks to demonstrate how local expressions of faith contribute to a deeper understanding of inculturation and contextual theology. Ultimately, this study is intended to contribute to broader anthropological and theological discourse by illuminating the dynamic relationship between tradition and religion in shaping communal identity and spiritual continuity.

Methodology

This study employed an inductive qualitative approach to explore the cultural and theological dimensions of the *Kuru We Fohon* tradition in Renrua Village. Data collection involved direct observation, informal interviews with clan elders and ritual leaders, and participation in ceremonial events. Through these methods, the researcher examined oral traditions, symbolic actions, and shared memories embedded in the ritual. Rather than applying predefined theories, the study allowed insights to emerge organically from recurring patterns in cultural expressions. The ceremony was viewed not only as a religious practice but as a social event integrated into daily life, with particular attention given to ritual dialogue, spatial arrangements, and symbolic gestures that reflect the community's belief in Jesus as the source of living water.

Descriptive analysis was used to trace the connections among theological views, ritual practices, and communal values. The study emphasized cultural sensitivity by recognizing the authority of local tradition bearers, whose insights contributed to the depth and reliability of the findings. Key ritual terms and expressions were preserved in their original form and interpreted within their cultural and spiritual context. This methodological orientation highlights that understanding indigenous rituals requires not only observing external behavior but also engaging with the spiritual and cosmological frameworks that shape communal identity and religious expression.

Research Findings

The tradition of Kuru We Fohon, practiced in Renrua Village, revolves around the sacred act of collecting water that is believed to possess spiritual power. This ritual is not merely a utilitarian practice but a ceremonial event reflecting the community's worldview, in which water is regarded as a source of life and divine favor. The term *Kuru We Fohon*, referring to the

drawing of sacred water, represents an enduring ancestral belief that continues to shape the community's spiritual consciousness.

This tradition has been transmitted orally through generations, serving as a marker of cultural identity in addition to its ritual function. According to the people of Renrua, the practice predates the arrival of institutional religion, which further legitimizes its sacred status through ancestral memory. Its continued observance signifies both reverence for tradition and a deeply held connection to the past.

The performance of this tradition is usually associated with the completion of a traditional ancestral house, known locally as *uma lulik*. The ceremony unfolds through several stages, including planning (*katak ema*), traditional dances such as *likurai* and *tebe*, the collection of sacred water, and a communal offering. These steps reveal a cyclical view of time and spiritual renewal, rooted in communal effort and reverence for the sacred.

Designated figures called meo, believed to possess spiritual power, are tasked with retrieving the water. They journey to the sacred spring, spend the night in vigil, and return before dawn carrying the water. Upon their return, the water is greeted ceremonially and placed in the ancestral house. This process highlights the community’s veneration of natural resources, which are interpreted as divine gifts.

A significant component of the ritual is the dialogue between the water bearers and the ritual leaders. This exchange, which takes place in an antiphonal (*call and response*) format, reinforces communal roles and strengthens social unity. These verbal interactions serve both liturgical and performative purposes, as they reveal layers of meaning and expressions of faith that are embedded in the ritual language.

The sacred water collected is used in several ways, including cooking ceremonial meals, sprinkling the ancestral house, and blessing the participants. These acts are not considered superstitious but are instead understood as liturgical actions that make the sacred tangible. The water serves both as a physical purifier and a medium of spiritual connection across generations.

According to members of the community, the ritual plays a vital role in affirming moral and religious identity. It is seen as a form of covenant enacted through ritual performance. The blessings received are not measured by material outcomes alone but are understood as signs of divine presence, peace, and communal well-being, expressed through oral traditions (lia nain) that carry theological and cultural weight.

Discussion

From an anthropological standpoint, traditions such as Kuru We Fohon reflect long-standing systems of belief preserved through oral transmission and ritual practice. The enduring nature of this tradition in Renrua Village confirms its significance as a living cultural framework that continues to shape communal identity. It is not merely retained for the sake of heritage, but functions as a dynamic expression of spiritual knowledge passed down through generations, shaping how the community understands and engages with the sacred (Soejono, 2004).

The theological dimension of Kuru We Fohon becomes evident in its resonance with Christian imagery, particularly as presented in the Gospel of John, which identifies Jesus as the source of living water. In John 4:10–14, this concept symbolizes both eternal life and divine sustenance. This idea closely mirrors the Renrua community's interpretation of We Fohon, which they understand as not only a symbol of life but also as a real and tangible channel for receiving divine blessing. The villagers do not view this water as metaphorical alone; rather, they experience it as something that physically and spiritually nurtures the community (Barclay, 1983; Zheng & Budiraharjo, 2024).

This theological parallel opens up meaningful space for inculturation, wherein indigenous ritual practices are not rejected, but reinterpreted through the lens of Christian belief. Within this process, the people of Renrua do not abandon their traditional values. Instead, they synthesize them with Christian teachings in a way that preserves cultural integrity. Rather than seeing conflict, they identify convergence, affirming that both ancestral practice and the Christian message are legitimate paths of encountering the divine (Verschuuren et al., 2010).

The belief that their ancestors already acknowledged the presence of a higher power before the arrival of Christianity serves to affirm the theological validity of the ritual. This conviction not only justifies the continued observance of the tradition but also enriches the community's spiritual worldview. The ritual, therefore, is not an empty formality but a lived expression of gratitude and petition, through which the grace of God is accessed via practices rooted in cultural memory and reverence (Agboada, 2022).

The merging of ancestral ritual and Christian theology illustrates a form of local theology where faith and culture enter into genuine dialogue. The act of collecting sacred water becomes a Christological symbol that deepens, rather than diminishes, cultural meaning. Through this process, traditional practices become avenues for evangelization and spiritual formation,

demonstrating that theological reflection can emerge organically from within the cultural life of a community (McNabb & DeVito, 2022).

Furthermore, the community's environmental awareness is deeply embedded within the ritual. The sacred spring is not treated as a mere natural resource, but as a sacred site that embodies both spiritual and ecological harmony. This integrated perspective challenges dominant paradigms that tend to dismiss indigenous rituals as archaic. On the contrary, such rituals offer a holistic view of life that encompasses ethical, spiritual, and environmental dimensions, affirming the wisdom inherent in local traditions (Palmer, 2019).

By highlighting the sanctity of both the ritual act and the water itself, the community articulates a theology of incarnation in which the sacred is discovered within the local context. In this theological framework, Christ is not introduced as a foreign figure but is encountered through the rhythms of communal life, the memory of ancestors, and the sacredness of the land. Revelation is not restricted to scripture or institutional structures, but also unfolds through the embodied experiences of ritual and the physical landscape of the people (Henry, 2010; van Deventer & Domeris, 2023).

This convergence between Kuru We Fohon and Christian theology illustrates that the religious identity of the Renrua people is not formed through separation but through synthesis. The tradition becomes a means for articulating faith in Christ in ways that resonate with cultural experience. This model demonstrates the capacity of local traditions to serve not only as cultural heritage but also as effective vehicles for deep theological expression and religious formation within the community (Simon et al., 2021).

Finally, the understanding of ritual as a form of covenant highlights the relational aspect of the community's faith. The blessings derived from the ceremony are not interpreted merely as supernatural interventions but as affirmations of divine presence. This theological insight fosters social cohesion, reinforces communal values, and provides a framework for interpreting spiritual experiences within the realities of everyday life. Through this lens, Kuru We Fohon becomes not only a ritual act but a continuous expression of sacred relationship and communal devotion (Yayasan Komunikasi Bina Kasih, 1983).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study is limited by its reliance on qualitative data collected from a single community within a specific cultural and geographical context. The findings, while rich in contextual insight,

may not be generalizable to other indigenous groups or regions with differing ritual practices and theological interpretations. Additionally, the analysis is based on a single ceremonial cycle, which may not fully capture variations across time or seasonal contexts.

Future research should consider comparative studies involving similar rituals in other communities to explore broader patterns of inculturation and theological adaptation. Longitudinal studies may also be useful in examining how these rituals evolve in response to social change, religious influence, or environmental pressures. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating ecological, liturgical, and sociolinguistic perspectives could deepen understanding of how traditional rituals continue to shape and be shaped by theological engagement and communal identity.

Conclusion

The Kuru We Fohon tradition exemplifies a dynamic integration of indigenous spirituality and Christian theology within the cultural life of the Renrua community. This ritual, rooted in ancestral belief and enriched by Christological interpretation, functions as both a spiritual practice and a theological expression grounded in local wisdom. By interpreting sacred water as a symbol of divine grace and communal blessing, the community affirms a living theology that reflects a deep harmony between faith and culture.

The study concludes that inculturation, when grounded in respectful dialogue and cultural continuity, can provide meaningful pathways for theological reflection and religious formation. Kuru We Fohon demonstrates that traditional rituals are not obstacles to faith but vital expressions of it, offering a contextual theology that affirms identity, fosters communal cohesion, and nurtures spiritual growth through culturally resonant practices.

Acknowledgement

The researcher expresses deep gratitude to the elders, clan leaders, and members of the Renrua community who generously shared their time, stories, and insights throughout this study. Their openness and commitment to preserving cultural traditions have made this research both meaningful and possible. The support and collaboration of local leaders provided the foundation for understanding the theological depth of the *Kuru We Fohon* ritual.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of any affiliated institution.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. It was conducted independently with support from the researcher's home institution and the voluntary participation of the local community.

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