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Inculturation of Easter in Rantepao: An Expression of Faith in the Torajan Culture

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Abstract

Humans being are homo symbolicum, the creatures who use sign/symbol to express a certain purpose. Almost human's actions expressed in symbols, including in religious life. One of the religious expressions that interesting to study which showed by the Catholics in Rantepao is Easter Celebration. Therefore, this research specially studies the Catholic Inculturation and the local culture of Toraja that actualized in the Easter Celebration in Rantepao. Rantepao Parish has tried to bring another Easter Celebration feel frame in Toraja nuances. Various local symbols were appointed tu further enliven the Easter Celebration. The great celebration was expressed in the threasure of the thought of the Toraja people.

Keywords: Easter, Inculturation, Rantepao, Church.

Introduction

The interaction between the Catholic faith and the Toraja community has generated a form of inculturation that helps to explain how elements of culture can be integrated into the transmission of faith. Various efforts have been made to embed the faith within the cultural fabric of Toraja society. The Church has introduced new expressions into traditional rites and rituals, reshaping the way sacred events are celebrated and understood within this local context.

Among these efforts, the Easter celebration in Rantepao stands out as a dynamic example of ongoing inculturation. Easter represents the culmination of Christian belief. It conveys the mystery of salvation, made manifest in Jesus Christ. Through the Easter celebration, this salvific mystery is fully presented and contemplated by the faithful. The statement ―No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends‖ (John 15:13) encapsulates the theological foundation of this event.

Christ's self-offering, as the ultimate act of salvation, occurred once and for all (cf. Hebrews 7:27). His passion, death, and resurrection form the core of this redemptive act. These mysteries are celebrated in the Eucharist, where the Church proclaims Christ's triumph over

death and affirms the victory of divine love over human sinfulness (cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium 6). The Eucharist thus becomes the central liturgical expression of Easter.

The Catholic community in Rantepao celebrates Easter in a manner that is distinct from other regions. The celebration is conducted within the cultural framework of the Toraja people. Cultural symbols specific to Toraja are integrated into the Easter liturgy. This localization of the celebration raises important theological and pastoral questions about its alignment with Christian doctrine.

There are divergent opinions within the community regarding this cultural integration. While some appreciate the initiative as a creative and contextual expression of faith, others express concern about potential syncretism. Questions have emerged concerning the extent to which these celebrations conform to the teachings of the Church, and whether certain adaptations compromise doctrinal integrity.

These concerns highlight the importance of critically evaluating the boundaries of liturgical adaptation. It is essential to determine whether such inculturated expressions still reflect authentic Christian values. The process of inculturation must be carefully examined in order to ensure that cultural elements illuminate rather than obscure the central mysteries of the faith.

The local parish of St. Theresia in Rantepao has actively engaged in developing a culturally resonant Easter celebration. By employing traditional symbols and local customs, the parish seeks to communicate the message of Easter in ways that are more meaningful to the Toraja faithful. These efforts are part of a broader pastoral strategy aimed at deepening faith through cultural familiarity.

At the same time, this experiment in liturgical inculturation has presented pastoral challenges. Some elements of the liturgy have been altered or replaced at the discretion of parish leadership. These changes have affected the structure and content of the celebration, prompting debate over their appropriateness and theological soundness.

In order to address these concerns, this study seeks to analyze the Easter celebration in Rantepao through the lens of inculturation. The analysis will focus on the theological, liturgical, anthropological, and pastoral dimensions of the event. Particular attention will be given to how Toraja cultural elements are used to express Christian truths.

This article ultimately aims to assess the extent to which the Easter celebration in Rantepao can be considered an authentic form of liturgical inculturation. By exploring both its

strengths and limitations, the study offers insights into how the Church can continue to engage local cultures while remaining faithful to its universal mission.

Method

This research aims to contribute valuable insights to Church authorities, including bishops, priests, and pastoral councils, in designing more contextually grounded pastoral programs. The study is classified as religious research, adopting an anthropological approach to examine how cultural expressions shape religious experience. A qualitative descriptive method was employed to explore the phenomenon of liturgical inculturation in depth. The primary research instrument was the researcher himself, who conducted direct observations and engaged in interpretative analysis. By immersing himself in the community's social dynamics, the researcher was able to read the cultural "text" as a reflection of the interplay between values, environment, and human decisions expressed through meaningful symbolic actions.

The study was conducted at St. Theresia Catholic Church in Rantepao, located in North Toraja Regency, South Sulawesi Province, during September 2021. The data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of four stages. First, data were collected through participatory observation, interviews, and document review. Second, data reduction was carried out by summarizing and identifying key themes, patterns, and relevant categories. Third, data were displayed using visual and descriptive formats to facilitate interpretation and further analysis. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified, providing answers to the research questions. Each stage of analysis was aimed at enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

Results and Discussion

The concept of inculturation emerged from developments in missiological theology and was later popularized by the Belgian missiologist Joseph Masson (Martasudjita, 2011). It was officially introduced into the theological discourse in 1977 through the document *Ad Populorum Dei Nuntius* No. 5. Although the Second Vatican Council (Vatican Council II) did not use the term ―inculturation‖ explicitly, it encouraged evangelization through culturally grounded approaches. A foundational reference for this principle can be found in *Gaudium et Spes* 58, which affirms that God has revealed Himself in ways that correspond with the cultural forms of different periods (Second Vatican Council, 1965).

In this regard, the Church has consistently drawn from various cultural resources throughout history in order to articulate, deepen, and express the message of Christ through liturgical practices and the diverse lives of faith communities (Second Vatican Council, 1965). Additionally, the Council affirmed that the culture of every people is not in conflict with the Gospel. Rather, culture is elevated, purified, and fulfilled in the mystery of Christ's incarnation and redemption (*Ad Gentes*, 9).

According to Martasudjita (2011), inculturation is a continuous process through which the Gospel is conveyed within a specific sociopolitical and religious-cultural context, while also transforming that very context and the people who live within it. This understanding introduces key theological implications that must be considered.

First, inculturation is not limited to expressing faith through local cultural forms. It also entails the internalization of faith that brings about personal and communal transformation. Expression may involve liturgical formulations such as prayers in the local language, visual representations, dances, paintings, songs, clothing, and traditional symbols. Internalization refers to daily actions that reflect the influence of Gospel values. Second, inculturation must reach the level of lived experience, not merely remain conceptual. It involves the totality of human existence, including emotions, instincts, habits, behavior patterns, and inherited cultural dispositions (Martasudjita, 2011). Third, the principal aim of inculturation is the existential transformation of the whole person in accordance with the Spirit of the Gospel. Thus, a central question is whether the Gospel of Jesus Christ has brought about such change within culturally embedded individuals. Since culture touches every dimension of human life, inculturation must reach every aspect of this reality. Fourth, local cultural elements used in inculturation must be able to illuminate, interpret, and deepen the mystery of Christ. These expressions should serve as mediating tools that help the faithful come to a deeper understanding of their relationship with Jesus (Martasudjita, 2011).

In recent years, particularly since Fr. Natan Runtung began serving as parish priest of St. Theresia in Rantepao, the Holy Week celebrations have attracted considerable attention due to their incorporation of Torajan cultural elements. These efforts reflect a pastoral strategy aimed at contextualizing the Easter message in a form that resonates with the local cultural worldview (Daeng, 1989; Schie, 2000).

However, such an approach has led to modifications in both the form and structure of the liturgy. Some parishioners expressed discomfort with these changes, particularly when specific

liturgical elements were replaced or adapted based on the priest's initiative. For example, the musical selections reflected the preferences of the parish leadership, emphasizing general religious songs over liturgical hymns appropriate to the occasion. Consequently, the liturgical function of music was not always achieved.

Proponents of this inculturated celebration view the innovations as a legitimate pastoral effort to help the faithful engage more deeply with the Easter mystery. The priest, in his role as shepherd, sought to interpret the mystery of faith in a way that corresponds with the local people's worldview (Tangdilintin, 1981). On the other hand, critics have voiced concerns about potential theological confusion or syncretism, especially when cultural expressions appear to overshadow doctrinal content.

Between 2015 and 2020, four inculturated Easter celebrations were held. Among them, the 2016 celebration remains the most prominent in collective memory, especially due to the Holy Thursday and Good Friday services. On Holy Thursday, the traditional foot-washing ritual, which typically involves twelve men representing the apostles, was altered to include 24 participants, both male and female. This inclusive adaptation predated the Vatican's official authorization and was seen by some as irregular. Furthermore, the ritual was performed not by the priest but by participants washing one another's feet, which raised additional liturgical concerns (Martasudjita, 2011).

The Good Friday service also deviated from conventional norms. It began at 9:00 a.m. to coincide with the hour believed to mark the beginning of Christ's Passion. A solemn procession moved from Bakti Square to the church. This procession included a cross draped with red and white cloth, under which women walked in reverence—a gesture derived from the *ma'pasonglo* ritual used in Torajan funeral customs. Other elements included traditional food offerings and symbolic items like gongs, bamboo flasks, and Torajan ceremonial attire. These adaptations reflect local customs that typically mark celebratory funeral rites for nobility (Koentjaraningrat, 2010; Geertz, 1992).

The celebration of Palm Sunday also incorporated local elements. Jesus' statue was carried using a Torajan-style litter, adorned with traditional headwear (*pa'sapu*), while participants wore cultural garments and waved palm leaves. In some instances, buffalo were also included in the procession, underscoring the influence of local ritual aesthetics (Hadikusuma, 1993; Wirawan, 1996).

During the Easter Vigil, further liturgical variations were observed. These included

candle dances by SEKAMI children and choreographed dances accompanying the singing of the *Gloria* and *Sanctus*. While these expressions enriched participation for some, others felt they detracted from the solemnity of the celebration. At times, unlisted songs were introduced unexpectedly, causing confusion among attendees (Alsa, 2014; Giddens, 1989).

Family involvement was another notable feature of the celebrations. For instance, Scripture readings were proclaimed by entire families, and in some cases, children played musical instruments while parents sang the Psalms. Numerous traditional Torajan symbols were incorporated, including red and white cloth, ceremonial clothing, water buffalo, headgear (*sarong*), and native foods such as boiled cassava, corn, and bananas. These elements carried cultural significance. For example, red cloth is typically used in funeral rituals as a sign of sincerity and mourning. In the context of Easter, it was variously interpreted as a symbol of Christ's blood or the Holy Spirit. Similarly, food offerings reflected the traditional Torajan practice of *merau'*, a form of fasting and abstinence during mourning periods (Edward, 2004; Hidayat, 2007).

Buffalo were presented as sacrificial offerings, signifying not only material wealth but also spiritual provision for the afterlife. Traditional attire and language were used throughout the liturgy, reinforcing the integration of faith and culture. In addition, certain elements such as the use of the Torajan language in prayers and songs, deepened the sense of communal identity (Sairin, 1992; Mukti Ali, 1992).

Although many participants were emotionally moved by the celebration, others voiced concerns regarding its theological clarity. The blending of sacred and cultural expressions generated diverse responses and highlighted the need for careful evaluation across theological, liturgical, anthropological, and pastoral domains.

Theologically, the inculturated Easter celebration in Rantepao must be examined with reference to core doctrinal principles. According to Pastor Yans Paganna (2021), the use of *ma'pasonglo*, a funeral rite traditionally reserved for Torajan nobility, raises theological concerns. In the Christian understanding, the Passion of Christ emphasizes humility, self-emptying, and suffering. Jesus, though divine, took the form of a servant (cf. Philippians 2:6–8).

Therefore, aligning Christ's death with a grandiose cultural ritual meant to honor noble lineage may risk distorting the meaning of the Cross. In Torajan tradition, *ma'pasonglo* involves a real, physical funeral with the presence of a corpse, while the Good Friday liturgy commemorates rather than reenacts Christ's death. These distinctions necessitate theological scrutiny to ensure

that inculturated forms preserve the paschal mystery in its true sense (Martasudjita, 2011).

From a liturgical standpoint, several elements introduced in Rantepao's Holy Week celebration diverge from the Church's prescribed rubrics. For example, the foot-washing ritual on Holy Thursday, which included more than twelve participants and involved both men and women, was implemented prior to Pope Francis' approval of such inclusivity. Additionally, the ritual was performed by laypeople washing one another's feet, rather than by the priest. These adaptations call for careful reflection on liturgical integrity (Martasudjita, 2011).

Further concerns arise in the scheduling of the Good Friday liturgy, which was held in the morning rather than the prescribed late afternoon or evening hours. According to Pastor Bine Saramae (2021), this adjustment, combined with the use of symbols denoting nobility, may conflict with the spirit of solemnity required for this day. Moreover, the inclusion of processional dances, gongs, and elaborate symbolic gestures during the Easter Vigil could distract the faithful from the spiritual focus of the liturgy (Geertz, 1992; Giddens, 1989).

Anthropologically, inculturation seeks to bridge the Church's universal faith with local wisdom. The Church's mission is enriched when it is able to integrate indigenous traditions into its liturgical expressions. One such example is the use of the Torajan language in prayers and songs, as well as the adaptation of sacred literature into ritual performances (Tangdilintin, 1981; Koentjaraningrat, 2010). Additionally, the traditional practice of *marok*, or voluntary abstinence, was adopted to signify Good Friday fasting. These examples illustrate that when local practices are meaningfully reinterpreted, they can enrich Catholic liturgical life.

However, not all cultural elements are readily compatible with Christian theology. The use of *ma'randing* (ritual dance to open ceremonial paths) and symbols of aristocracy during the Good Friday procession may require further anthropological and theological dialogue. The challenge lies in discerning whether such symbols deepen or obscure the Christian mystery. Therefore, more in-depth ethnographic and comparative theological studies are necessary (Hadikusuma, 1993; Sairin, 1992).

From a pastoral perspective, the inculturated celebration has generated both enthusiasm and division within the local Catholic community. Attendance at the inculturated Good Friday celebration reached approximately 1,200 to 1,500 people, indicating high interest and participation. Many parishioners were emotionally moved, with some reporting tears during the rituals, suggesting a deep spiritual impact (Ronald R., 2021; Sr. Maxima, 2021). The incorporation of traditional attire, accessories, and foods allowed participants to engage both

culturally and spiritually.

Nonetheless, some members of the community opposed the celebration, perceiving it as the creative initiative of the parish priest rather than a communal expression of faith. These individuals chose to attend Easter celebrations at neighboring parishes in Nanggala, Pangli, or Nonongan. Others participated in both the inculturated morning celebration and a more conventional liturgy in the evening. This divergence highlights the necessity of developing a pastoral model that involves inclusive dialogue and shared liturgical discernment (Mukti Ali, 1992; Alsa, 2014).

In principle, inculturation should strengthen the faithful's understanding of the Gospel, not lead to division. It must be a collective expression of the Church's life rather than the vision of a single leader. Therefore, ongoing pastoral engagement is essential to prevent fragmentation and to ensure that inculturation remains a communal and faith-affirming process (Daeng, 1989; Hidayat, 2007).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study was limited to the Easter celebrations within a single parish community in Rantepao. The findings are therefore context-specific and may not fully reflect the diverse practices of inculturation occurring in other regions of Toraja or across Indonesia. Moreover, the analysis relied heavily on qualitative data, which, while rich in insight, may lack generalizability to broader populations. The study did not incorporate systematic theological validation from Church authorities beyond local pastoral perspectives, which may influence the interpretation of liturgical norms.

Future research should include comparative analyses involving multiple parishes or dioceses to evaluate how inculturation practices are implemented across different sociocultural settings. Ethnographic methods could be enhanced by integrating theological reflection from liturgists and doctrinal experts to assess the legitimacy of cultural adaptations. Additional studies could also examine the long-term spiritual impact of inculturated celebrations on faith formation and community cohesion.

Conclusion

The inculturation of Easter in Rantepao represents a significant pastoral initiative that seeks to bridge the universal truths of Christian faith with the cultural expressions of the Torajan

people. By incorporating indigenous symbols, language, and ritual elements, the local Church has attempted to deepen religious meaning and spiritual participation. These efforts reflect a genuine desire to make the liturgy more relevant and accessible to the faithful.

However, the findings also reveal important theological and liturgical challenges. Some cultural adaptations, though well-intentioned, risk overshadowing core doctrinal meanings if not carefully discerned. Tensions have emerged within the community regarding authenticity, ecclesial unity, and liturgical fidelity. Therefore, a more collaborative and theologically informed approach to inculturation is necessary to ensure that such expressions remain grounded in the Gospel and consistent with the sacramental life of the Church.

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Disclosure Statement

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