e-ISSN: 2656-7997
p-ISSN: 2775-3425

Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology
Vol. 07, No. 02, August 2025: 325 - 342

Inculturation Theology: Interpreting *Tortor* Batak Toba as a Participation in the Liturgical Celebration in the Archdiocese of Medan

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Submitted: 15-01-2025 | Accepted: 03-11-2025 | Accepted: 03-11-2025

Abstracts:

This study describes the inculturation theology about traditional dance of Batak Toba which is called Tortor in Medan Archdiocese. This research uses a qualitative approach to find out the meaning of Tortor as a participation of lay people in liturgical ceremony. Tortor is defined not only as a dance, but a medium to express appreciation, honor, and solidarity among Batak Toba people. It can be related to the liturgical ceremony. The meaning of each movements can be interpreted in the of cultural meanings. As a cultural celebration Tortor must be understood as a way to express the identity and solidarity of the Batak Toba people. Every movement shows the relationship with God, human beings, and nature. Tortor expresses the adoration to Almighty, closeness to human beings and loving to nature.

Keywords:

Inculturation, Participation, Tortor, Batak Toba, Liturgical Celebration.

Introduction

The Batak ethnic is composed of six sub-ethnic divisions: Toba, Karo, Simalungun, Pakpak, Angkola, and Mandailing. Every ethnic group exhibits distinctive cultural systems and traditions. In ritualistic and

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24071/jaot.v7i2.11397
Web: http://e-journal.usd.ac.id/index.php/JAOT | E: jaot@usd.ac.id

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ceremonial contexts, the utilization of traditional musical instruments such as gondang or uning-uningan is invariably accompanied by a performative dance tradition known as *Tortor*. The rhythmic and melodic structure of gondang is meticulously synchronized with the kinetic expressions of manortor (the act of performing the *Tortor* dance). Each choreographic movement within *Tortor* is imbued with semiotic significance, articulated through the interplay of musical and gestural elements. Consequently, *Tortor* and gondang function as an integrated cultural system, inseparable in their roles as vehicles of Batak ritual and identity.[1]

Tortor is an artistic expression that reflect about the social, cultural, and philosophical values of Batak Toba traditions. In its socio-cultural role, *Tortor* serves as an essential medium for strengthening the identity and solidarity of the Batak Toba people. The philosophy of *Tortor* emphasizes harmony, balance, and unity with nature, which are expressed through its movements, accompanying music, and the traditional attire worn during the performance.[2]

Tortor involves the coordinated movement of various body parts, including the feet, hands, fingers, soles, back, and shoulders. This series of physical gestures conveys inner experiences, emotions, and the spiritual values of the Batak Toba people. Each movement embodies profound cultural meanings, aimed at delivering messages that enrich social life and strengthen the identity and cultural heritage of the Batak Toba community.[3] *Tortor* is imbued with the philosophical essence of

1 Edison R. L. Tinambunan, "Gondang Batak Toba: Makna Religi Dan Implikasinya Pada Keagamaan Dan Adat," *Jurnal SMART (Studi Masyarakat, Religi, Dan Tradisi)* 8, no. 2 (December 30, 2022): 261–73.

2 Agung Suharyanto, Robby Hidajat, and Panji Suroso, "Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Penciptaan Seni Tortor Batak Toba Dalam Perspektif Seni Susanne K . Toba ' s Batak Tortor in Susanne K . Langer ' s Art Perspective" 4, no. 1 (2024), 1–8.

3 Suharyanto, Hidajat, and Suroso., 2024.

traditional customs but it holds a sacred character. It is not merely a dance or a visually pleasing form of entertainment; but it possesses a mystical quality, characterized by grace, harmony, and perfection. The ritualistic nature of *Tortor* reflects its deep connection to the cultural traditions, reverence, and its role as a medium for preserving and communicating the values of Batak Toba society.[4]

This research focuses on the search for the meaning of *Tortor* as a form of participation by the faithful in liturgical celebrations. In major religious events such as church blessings, the reception of the sacrament of confirmation, and the inauguration of the Parish Pastoral Council, *Tortor* is often performed by designated dancers (panortor). These dancers are specifically trained, accompanied by gondang or uning-uningan. The author observes that the dancers perform *Tortor* merely as a dance with improvised body movements.

From this phenomenon, the author is interested in exploring the deeper meaning of *Tortor* in the Batak Toba tradition, so that when *Tortor* is performed during liturgical celebrations, it transcends being just a performance as well, but becomes a form of participation by the faithful in liturgical celebrations. This study is framed as : Is the cultural understanding of *Tortor* fully grasped within its own context? Can *Tortor* be interpreted as a legitimate form of participation by the faithful in liturgical celebrations? What is the Church's doctrinal stance on inculturation? These questions are posed with the aim of determining whether *Tortor* can continue to be preserved as an integral cultural expression or whether it requires critical scrutiny within the framework of liturgical participation and theological discourse.

[4] Nelson Lumbantoruan, *Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Batak Toba* (Medan: CV Mitra Medan, 2012, 90.

Method

This study utilizes a qualitative approach, drawing upon various research on *Tortor* from a cultural perspective within customary ceremonies. In the research conducted by Tati Dina and Swis Tamtoro on *Tortor* in the marriage ceremony of the Batak Toba people in Tangga Batu Village, Tampahan District, Toba Samosir Regency, North Sumatra Province, *Tortor* is described as a dance that involves the entire body, with the rhythm of gondang as the central movement for the hands, feet, back, and shoulders. However, many Batak Toba people do not fully understand the meaning behind each movement. Through a descriptive qualitative approach, it was found that certain hand movements in *Tortor* carry specific meanings. The movement maneane signifies a request for blessings, mamasamasu represents expressing gratitude, mangido conveys both asking for and receiving blessings, and manomba signifies showing respect to the wife's parents.

In a study on *Tortor* sombah as a cultural symbol in the Batak Toba community's funeral rites for revered elders, Ilham Akbar, Ernida Kadir, and Yusfil delve into the urgent need to understand the symbolic significance of *Tortor* sombah. Given that the deceased is a respected figure, *Tortor* sombah serves as a vehicle for social interaction, fostering relationships within kinship networks and acting as a mechanism for preserving the social fabric of the Batak Toba community. The movements of *Tortor* are emblematic of honor and reverence, as well as the ongoing relationship between the living and their ancestors. In her research on gondang naposo within the Batak Toba community, Ruth Hertami Dyah Nugrahaningsih asserts that *Tortor* naposo plays a critical role in preserving cultural traditions, fulfilling diverse functions in social-religious, recreational, psychological, aesthetic, and economic spheres.

According to Steffi Ramelia Mantavani Sirait and Surya Masniari Hutagalung, in Batak Toba traditional ceremonies, there are 11 movements in the *Tortor* dance: 1) Placing the hands on the stomach as the beginning (mula-mula). 2) Bringing both hands together in a gesture of worship (somba). 3) The hands in a worship position are placed in front of the face. 4) Both hands open. 5) The opened hands are moved forward. 6) Both hands are raised outward. 7) The hand movement beneath the ear (tangi). 8) The hand movement near the mouth (bakkol manghatahon). 9) The manerser movement (ringgas mangulahon). 10) The movement of si boru parbahulbahul nabolon. 11) The marembas movement.[5]

Each movement in *Tortor* dance holds symbolic significance. The gesture of placing the hands on the abdomen signifies that all individuals originate from the womb. In Batak culture, the womb is a symbol of Ibu Pertiwi, or the sacred land of Bona Pasogit. The "somba" gesture represents an act of worship and reverence toward the Supreme Being (Mulajadi Nabolon). Typically, the "somba" is performed 30 times, directed in three distinct directions: 10 times forward, 10 times to the left, and 10 times to the right. These movements correspond to the deities Batara Guru, Sorisohilapan, and Bala Bulan. The gesture of opening the hands in front of the face, resembling a mirror, signifies the act of self-examination. It implies that before approaching God, one must first reflect upon their own conduct and relationships with others. The movement of raising the palms upward beneath the ears represents a prayer for wisdom and guidance from the Almighty.[6]

[5] Surya Masniari Hutagalung Steffi Ramelia Mantavani Sirait, "Analysis of The Meaning of Movement of The Traditional Dance of Batak Toba" 2019, no. 2132 (n.d.): 27–31.

[6] Steffi Ramelia Mantavani Sirait., 2019.

Result and Discussion

Tor-tor has developed into a traditional dance form of the Toba Batak community. This dance embodies and reflects the cultural values and life journey of the Toba Batak people. It conveys essential virtues such as courage, loyalty, and authority, and serves as a significant cultural medium utilized in various social and ceremonial contexts.[7]

For the sake of evangelization and inculturation we need to observe and reflect *Tortor* in the perspective of Catholic Church. Based on document "De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione" [8], liturgy serves as the principal arena where Christians encounter God and His emissary, Jesus Christ (cf. John 17:3). The Church, by its very nature, is universal, calling all nations to engage in diverse languages and to permeate the liturgical life with the various cultures inherent to every people. Throughout the Church's pilgrimage in this world, there exists a multitude of human and societal needs that must be addressed (cf. 1 Tim 2:1-4) (art.22).

The fulfillment of these needs is an ongoing process that will persist for as long as the Church remains in existence. Based on its pastoral authority, the Church is entrusted with the responsibility to organize the liturgy for the benefit of the faithful, adapting it to the context of time, place, and circumstances. However, there are certain liturgical elements that must remain inviolate and unaltered. Altering what has been firmly established by the Church ceases to be an act of inculturation and instead becomes the stripping of the liturgy from its essential and foundational aspects (art. 25). Within the liturgy, the faith of the Church is expressed

7 Puji Lestari Lambok Hermanto Sihombing, "Tortor Dance: Preserving Indonesian Culture," *Gesture* Vol. 11 No (2022): 154–60.

8 KWI, *De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione*, Seri Dokum (Jakarta: Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 2011.

symbolically and in communal participation. The maintenance of binding regulations remains indispensable in order to safeguard against errors. Additionally, these regulations serve the purpose of transmitting the faith in its fullness, ensuring that what is prayed (lex orandi) is in harmony with what is believed (lex credendi) by the Church (art. 27).

Inculturation is often closely linked with evangelization. The Church's missionary tradition has always sought to proclaim the Gospel to peoples in their own languages. For the Word of God to be rightly received and to bear fruit, it is necessary to involve culture (art. 28). The situations encountered are always varied, and the status of Christians in each place is not always the same. In some contexts, they may be in the majority, while in others, they may be in the minority. This status has a significant impact on the existence of Christians in those places (art. 29).

Liturgy is an activity in which the movements and bodily postures play a fundamental role. The gestures of both the priest and the congregation express active participation and foster a spirit of reverence. Each culture possesses its own set of movements and postures, which, as far as possible, should be aligned with those found in Scripture. Among various cultures, it is instinctive for people to sing, often accompanied by dance movements from the entire congregation. Such expressions may be integrated into liturgical celebrations, provided they convey acts of adoration, praise, offering, and supplication from the whole community. However, it is essential to ensure that these dance movements are not merely viewed as a performance. Through art, the faithful are able to participate in liturgical celebrations, encounter God, and engage in prayer (art. 41-43). *Tortor* must be practiced not mere a dance but a participation.

According to Schreiter, cultural texts are not easily analyzed, particularly in the fields of art and religion. The field of art is difficult to analyze because the aesthetic space serves as a meeting point for various forces within a culture. There are many elements that need to be examined. A traditional dance, for instance, encapsulates various worldviews, beliefs, and convictions, and carries symbols understood by a specific ethnic group. Similarly, the field of religion faces a comparable challenge, as the signs it possesses have multiple, often metaphorical, meanings. Religious texts are inherently tied to the traditions of a culture.[9]

Through inculturation, the proclaimers of the Gospel not only come to understand and appreciate the local culture but also strive to ensure that the Gospel is received, enabling individuals to express their Christian experience in a manner that is in harmony with their traditions, while remaining true to the Christian faith (RM 53). Pope John Paul II outlines two principles in the process of inculturation: conformity with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church (RM 54). These principles continue to serve as the Church's benchmarks to avoid potential risks in the process of inculturation. The first risk is a disregard for the local culture, which may result in the Gospel being perceived as foreign. The second risk is an excessive valorization of a culture, which may lead to distortions. The Church remains mindful of these risks, recognizing that culture is a human creation marked by sin, and therefore requires constant purification and perfection (RM 54).[10]

According to Pope Francis, inculturation and its process are carried out exclusively within the framework of evangelization, which constitutes

9 Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2021), 47-48.
10 Johanes Paulus II, *Redemptoris Missio: Tugas Perutusan Sang Penebus* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 2021).

the fundamental mission of the Church (EG 111). Evangelization is the responsibility of all the people of God, who are on their pilgrimage toward God. The Church is called to move outward (EG 24). As such, communities are urged to make concrete efforts in advancing on the path of pastoral conversion and mission, rather than merely engaging in administrative tasks (EG 25). This requires courage from each community to critically dismantle outdated perspectives through a clear process of purification and renewal (cf. EG 30).[11]

It must be acknowledged that the process of inculturation involves challenges that the Church must confront (EG 68-70). Within the diverse realities of culture, it remains possible for authentic Christian values to be expressed in ways that are unique to each culture (EG 68). Pope Francis builds upon the vision of Pope John Paul II in advocating for inculturation, emphasizing the need to proclaim the Gospel using culturally appropriate categories, thus fostering a new synthesis with each culture (EG 129). Consequently, the process of inculturation is an enduring one, often described as "never-ending" (EG 126), proceeding at a gradual pace (EG 129), and continually evolving (EG 122). In this process, the role of the Holy Spirit is highlighted. The Holy Spirit is present to beautify the Church by unveiling new dimensions of God's revelation and imbuing the Church with a renewed identity (EG 116).[12]

Ladislav Nemet states that in the FABC document, inculturation is defined as a more complex encounter between the Gospel and a local church within the entire context of the realities of Asia, which is confronted with poverty, religious pluralism, and cultural diversity. These three realities of Asia, which have been emphasized since the FABC

11 Paus Fransiskus, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Dokpen KWI, 2014).
12 Paus Fransiskus

session in 1974, represent significant challenges for the Church in Asia. Dialogue with the poor, with other religions, and with various cultures has become the vision of Church leaders in Asia. The foundation of Asian theology is inseparable from the contextual realities of Asia. The development of indigenous theology represents a continuous effort to enable the local Church in Asia to grow and evolve into a Church that is both rooted in and inculturated within its cultural context.[13]

The Church is called to be present within society, addressing the challenges faced by its people. Moreover, this theology of inculturation aims to assist Asians in remaining authentically Asian. The Church is capable of embodying the local culture while respecting local customs and traditions. However, the local Church is not to function in isolation; it must remain in communion with the Universal Church. Local Church strives to celebrate Eucharist due to to the local culture.

In his exploration of liturgical formation, Stenli Vianney Pondaag references Romano Guardini's reflections on liturgical actions or acts of worship. Pondaag interprets these actions as integrative expressions that involve both the soul and the body. Bodily gestures, in this view, serve as outward manifestations of faith and of the inner life of believers. Furthermore, liturgical actions possess a communal, celebratory, and structured character, carried out collectively by individuals as members of the ecclesial community. The coordination and unity of movement within these celebrations are considered essential to the integrity of the liturgical act.[14]

13 Emanuel Martasudjita, 143-144.

14 Komisi Liturgi KWI, *Masa Depan Liturgi Di Indonesia: Dari Formasi Sampai Inkulturasi Liturgi* (Jakarta: Penerbit Obor, 2024).

The Archdiocese of Medan is composed of diverse ethnic communities, one of which is the Batak Toba people, renowned for their traditional *tortor* dance. This dance holds a significant role within the context of the Eucharistic celebration. Generally, there are three significant moments during which *Tortor* is performed in liturgical celebrations namely opening, offertory and closing moment. The dancers thoroughly prepare themselves, adorning ulos (traditional Batak fabric) and customary attire. Ulos is seen as the symbol of wisdom.[15] By performing *Tortor*, the dancers actively engage in and express Batak Toba cultural identity.[16] This identity is clearly reflected not only in the traditional garments they wear but also in the ritualistic movements of the *Tortor*, which are deeply rooted in Batak traditions.

In *Tortor*, all the participants unite in solidarity as a Batak Toba people in the celebration.[17] In many cultural celebration *Tortor* is very usual to be presented. In liturgical celebrations, especially during the Eucharistic Mass, *Tortor* is performed at the entrance, offertory, and closing moments. The first moment is the entrance of Eucharistic Mass. *Tortor* is performed to accompany and ceremonially lead the liturgical ministers toward the altar. This procession is typically supported by gondang (traditional Batak music), with selected members of the the faithfuls participating in the dance. Gondang has special meaning in Toba Batak culture.[18] Designated dancers take up specific positions to create a

15 Edison Robertus Lamarsen Tinambunan, "Batak Toba Ethnic in Indonesia as a Locus Theologicus: Exploring the Spiritual, Wisdom and Aesthetic Values of Ragi Idup Ulos," *International Journal of Indonesian Philosophy & Theology* 4, no. 1 (2023): 53–63, https://doi.org/10.47043/ijipth.v4i1.46

16 Maria Serlitaria Nainggolan, "Makna Tari Tortor Sebagai Identitas Orang Batak Di Kota Balikpapan," *EJournal Ilmu Komunikasi* 5, no. 1 (2017): 156–69.

17 Putri Nurdiana, Jamorlan Siahaan, and Rosita Ginting, "Toba Ethnic Pangurason Tor-Tor Performance: A Study of Local Wisdom," *Formosa Journal of Science and Technology* 2, no. 12 (2023): 3289–96, https://doi.org/10.55927/fjst.v2i12.7406.

18 Irwansyah Harahap, "Antropologi Indonesia Gondang Di Komunitas Parmalim Batak Toba : Teks , Konteks Dan Aspek Performatif," *Antropologi Indonesia* Vol. 33, no. 1 (2012), https://doi.org/10.7454/ai.v33i1.2127.

ritual pathway, guiding the ministers toward the presider's area. The priest, as a sign of Christ's presence in the celebration, is greeted with *Tortor* somba, a gesture in which the dancers place their palms together, facing upward. The one being greeted responds by turning their palms downward. Subsequently, the dancers (panortor) retreat in a respectful manner, escorting the honored individuals to their designated seats, all while being accompanied by the gondang panomunomuon. Hence, the *Tortor* performed to welcome the priests and liturgical ministers is called *Tortor* panomunomuon.

The second moment is the offertory in the Mass. *Tortor* is performed during the presentation of the offerings, including bread, wine, and the fruits of the earth. As the offerings are processed toward the altar, the dancers position themselves at the front and begin their movements. At this stage, various offerings—including bread and wine carried by appointed individuals—are brought forward. These may also include agricultural products such as rice and cassava, household goods, and prepared food items, reflecting the communal and symbolic nature of the offering. Representatives of the congregation also present the monetary collections.

Following this, the dancers take their position at the front and perform *Tortor* with solemnity and measured grace, processing toward the altar while the offertory bearers follow at a steady walking pace. The priest, assisted by altar servers (misdinar), receives the offerings and places them at a designated location. The performance of *Tortor* during this liturgical act is marked by a strong sense of reverence, embodied in the traditional gesture of mangurdot, which expresses humility and devotion This particular dance is referred to as *Tortor* pelean. The dancers, dressed in full traditional attire, including ulos, perform their

dance accompanied by gondang or uning-uningan. The movements they execute follow specific patterns, each of which holds symbolic meaning, with particular attention given to gestures of reverence and worship.

This act of offering serves as a theological expression of the participants' identification with and participation in the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist. The faithful are specifically called to unite themselves with Christ's offering. This union is not merely symbolic but represents a deep spiritual reality that transforms the believer's life and relationship with God.[19] So that, the performance of *Tortor* during this liturgical act is marked by a strong sense of reverence, embodied in the traditional gesture of mangurdot, which expresses humility and devotion. It is also said as *Tortor* sombah. In addition to executing the mangurdot movement, the dancers perform a cupping hand gesture accompanied by a rhythmic vertical motion as they proceed toward the altar. This gesture symbolizes a supplication for divine benediction and serves as a manifestation of spiritual devotion and reverence toward God.[20]

The third moment is the closing of the Mass. It occurs after the concluding blessing. Positioned in front, the dancers perform a closing *Tortor* to the rhythm of gondang, leading the altar servers as they recess from the sanctuary toward the sacristy. The tone of this concluding dance is both joyful and reverent, with dancers maintaining a posture of worship—characterized by open hands and controlled movements—as a symbolic expression of gratitude at the conclusion of the Eucharistic

19 Michael McGuckian, "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass" (2005).

20 Ilham Akbar, Ernida Kadir, "Pergelaran Tor-Tor Sombah Pada Upacara Adat Kematian Saur Matua Dalam Tinjauan Semiotika Peirce," *Bercadik* Vol. 5 No. (2022): 98–104.

celebration. The dancers perform the *Tortor* accompanied by the gondang.[21]

In these three moments, *Tortor* serves to guide the faithful in directing all their senses towards God, who is manifest in the person of the priest. It involves offering gifts as a sign of reverence and devotion to God, while accompanying the priest and liturgical ministers back to the sacristy. The movements of *Tortor* are not arbitrary or performed without purpose, as they are not intended as mere entertainment. Rather, *Tortor* symbolizes respect, worship, and the communal solidarity of the congregation within the liturgical celebration. Through *Tortor*, the faithful engage in and partake in the liturgical rites in a manner that reflects their cultural identity.

The Significance of *Tortor* in Liturgical Celebrations and Contemporary Challenges

The use of *Tortor*, a traditional Batak dance, within liturgical celebrations represents a meaningful form of inculturation, where local cultural expressions are integrated into religious worship. This dance serves not only as a visual and physical manifestation of communal faith but also as a conduit for expressing profound spiritual values such as reverence, thanksgiving, and devotion to God. As an embodied art form, *Tortor* conveys the human longing for connection with the Divine and symbolizes the aspiration for unity between the earthly and the sacred. Within the context of the Eucharist, the structured and intentional movements of *Tortor*, often performed with cultural and aesthetic

[21] Neloson Lumbantoruan, *Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Batak Toba*, ed. Tim Editor Mitra (Medan: CV. Mitra, 2012).

sensitivity, serve as a ritual language through which worshippers participate more fully in the mystery of the liturgy.

Despite its deep symbolic and spiritual significance, *Tortor* is experiencing a decline in contemporary liturgical practice. This reduction is not merely quantitative but also qualitative, as the original sacred meaning of the dance is increasingly being replaced by more secular and performative interpretations. The traditional musical accompaniment, gondang, which is integral to the dance's cultural and ritual identity, is frequently substituted with modern instruments such as electronic keyboards or pre-recorded music accessed from digital platforms. These substitutions not only alter the auditory dimension of the ritual but also disrupt the cultural authenticity of the practice.

Additionally, the choreography of *Tortor* itself has been affected by external influences, particularly through exposure to popular media. Movements that were once carefully preserved and passed down through generations are now being modified—often unconsciously—by trends seen on platforms like YouTube and social media. As a result, the dance risks being stripped of its liturgical integrity, losing its function as a sacred act of worship and instead being perceived as a form of entertainment. This transformation raises critical questions about the preservation of cultural identity within the liturgical context and the challenges of maintaining theological and ritual depth in an increasingly globalized and media-saturated environment.

Conclusion

In line with the process of inculturation promoted by the Catholic Church, *Tortor*, originally a cultural heritage, can serve as a means to express the participation of the faithful in the liturgical celebration.

However, this is not a simple task. The presence of *Tortor* in liturgical celebrations especially in three moments namely opening, offertory and closing moment, must be continually evaluated to ensure that it is not misunderstood as mere entertainment or spectacle, but rather maintains the sacred nature of the celebration. Therefore, the dancers must receive adequate catechesis so that their participation through *Tortor* is understood as an offering for the glory of God. *Tortor* as a part of Toba Batak traditions can be accepted in liturgical ceremonies especially in Eucharist. The gestures and movements of every dancers, gondang (the traditional music), and ulos (traditional clothes) will support the participation of people in the liturgical celebration.

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