

From Mystical Tradition to Christian Expression of Faith: The Transformation of the Meaning of Karo Gong Music in the Liturgy at the Parish of Saint Catherine Tiga Juhar

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Abstracts:

This ethnographic study analyzes the inculturation and transformation of Karo Gong music from an indigenous Pemena ritual function into a Catholic liturgical expression at Saint Catherine Parish, Tiga Juhar. Fieldwork conducted throughout December 2025 utilized participant observation and in-depth interviews with six key informants, comprising parish clergy, liturgical leaders, customary elders, and lay parishioners. Findings reveal that integrating the Karo Gong was achieved through symbolic purification, Christocentric re-orientation (1 Tim 2:5), and technical adaptations in tempo and volume dynamics. The instrument's acoustic function shifted from invoking ancestral spirits (begu) to serving as a "musical sacrament" (sacramentali) that enhances memoria and epiclesis during the Eucharist. Theoretically, this study contributes to Asian inculturation theology by demonstrating how incarnational logic and liturgical purification elevate indigenous musical artifacts into sacred media, preventing syncretism while strengthening the faithful's active participation (actuosa participatio) and cultural identity.

Keywords:

Catholic Liturgy, Ethnography, Inculturation, Karo Gong Music, Transformation of Meaning.

Introduction

Music has been an integral part of liturgical celebrations since the early Church, serving as a means of proclaiming the faith and involving the faithful in the mystery of salvation. The Catholic Church views liturgical music not as a neutral element or mere aesthetic decoration, but as a form of service that helps the faithful direct their hearts to God. Historically, liturgy has always interacted with the local cultural context, from the adoption of Jewish songs to the musical influences of the Greeks and Romans, which were later theologically refined into Gregorian music. This dynamic between faith and culture confirms that the acceptance of music in Church worship is an ongoing process of dialogue.¹

The principle of openness to the cultural wealth of nations was formally reaffirmed in the Second Vatican Council through the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.² The Church states that traditional elements that are not bound to superstition or heretical teachings can be considered for integration into the liturgy as long as they are in harmony with the true nature of worship. Therefore, inculturation must be understood as a process of theological dialogue between the Gospel and culture, not merely superficial adaptation. However, there are clear theological boundaries, namely that liturgical music must be sacred, dignified, and support the active participation of the faithful (*actuosa participatio*). An example of the success of this process can be seen in the pipe organ; an instrument that originally came from secular European culture but, through a process of purification of meaning, is now revered as an instrument that adds to the majesty of the

¹ Aji Rusmansyah, "Musik Liturgi Gereja Katolik" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syarif Hidayatullah, 2010).

² Konsili Vatikan II, "Sacrosanctum Concilium (Konstitusi Tentang Liturgi Suci), Terjemahan Oleh R. Hardawirana, SJ," in *Seri Dokumen Gerejawi No. 9*, ed. Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan KWI (Jakarta: Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan KWI, 1990), no. 37.

liturgy. This historical fact opens up theological space to assess other local instruments based on their transformation of meaning.³

In the context of the Karo community in North Sumatra, traditional music using instruments such as Gongs, drums, and *sarunai* has a deep spiritual significance. Structurally and organologically, the Karo Gong consists of a pair of forged bronze flat-rimmed percussion instruments—the larger *Gung* and the smaller pitched *Pungly*—ranging from 30 to 50 cm in diameter. Played with padded wooden beaters, the instrument produces low, resonant acoustic frequencies. In the traditional *Pemena* belief system,⁴ the sound of the Gong is understood as a symbolic medium of communication between humans and the spirit world, capable of opening up a space for encounter with the supernatural realm. The use of Gongs in various rituals, such as harvest ceremonies (*Mer dang Mer dem*)⁵ and rituals to summon missing persons who are believed to have been captured by supernatural beings (*umang*),⁶ demonstrates the role of this instrument as a medium of spiritual communication that is steeped in mystical and cosmological dimensions.⁷

This socio-religious dynamic is vividly reflected in the Parish of Saint Catherine Tiga Juhar, an indigenous rural pastoral center within the Archdiocese of Medan. Established independently on August 11, 2011 (previously a station under St. Joseph Parish Delitua), the parish is located in the Sinembah Tanjung Muda (STM) Hulu District of Deli Serdang Regency. It oversees 14 mission stations (*stasi*)—including

³ Konsili Vatikan II, SC no 120.

⁴ Lisbhet Same Lady Br Tarigan and Puspitawati, "Praktik Pemena Pada Etnik Karo Ditinjau Dari Analisis Pierre Bordieu Di Desa Kidupen Kabupaten Karo," *MESIR: Journal of Management Education Social Sciences Information and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2024): 185–93. "*Pemena* merupakan kepercayaan pertama dalam masyarakat Karo, telah ada sebelum masuknya agama Kristen, Hindu, Islam dan agama lainnya belum masuk ke Tanah Karo dan tergolong pada aliran kepercayaan yang bersifat Animisme.

⁵ Arita, "Mengenal Alat Musik Tradisional Karo: Memperkenalkan Rebab, Serunai Dan Gong," [perpusteknik.com](https://perpusteknik.com/alat-musik-tradisional-karo/), 2023, <https://perpusteknik.com/alat-musik-tradisional-karo/>.

⁶ Interview with Opung Nini Karo (Indigenous Cultural Elder), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tangga Batu Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025.

⁷ Interview with Ketek Karo-karo (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025; Interview with Nuah Ginting (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

Buntu, Kuta Jurung, and Rumah Sumbul—and ministers to 1,140 Catholic families, totaling 3,995 parishioners. Administered by the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (OFMConv), the parish embodies a deeply agrarian Karo population where ancestral traditions continuously intersect with daily life. The presence of the Catholic Church in Karo Land brings both challenges and opportunities in bringing the Gospel together with local culture.⁸ However, integrating an instrument with a strong mystical background like the Karo Gong requires theological and pastoral acumen. The Church bears the responsibility of ensuring that the use of these instruments is no longer a continuation of traditional spirit-invocation practices, but has undergone a purification of meaning as a means of Christian prayer and praise.⁹

Based on this background, this study aims to ethnographically examine the process of inculturation of Karo Gong music in the Parish of Santa Katarina Tiga Juhar. The main focus is on analyzing the transformation of the meaning of Gong music from a mystical tradition to an expression of Christian faith, as well as its impact on the religious experience of the congregation. Through an ethnographic approach, this study is expected to contribute theologically and pastorally to the development of contextual liturgy in Indonesia.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with an ethnographic approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the inculturation practices of Karo Gong music at the Santa Katarina Tiga Juhar Parish. The ethnographic approach was selected based on the focus of the study, which examines lived meanings, ritual experiences, and cultural symbols

⁸ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus Di Bumi Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2021, 25.

⁹ Abdi Guna Sitepu, Cica Yola, and Br Sagala, "Bangunan Gereja Inkulturatif," *Vox Dei, Jurnal Teologi Dan Pastoral* 4 (2023): 225–37.

within the community to reveal indigenous liturgical characteristics holistically.¹⁰ Fieldwork and qualitative empirical data collection were conducted intensively throughout December 2025 at the Santa Katarina Tiga Juhar Parish and its surrounding indigenous areas, such as Tangga Batu Village in the STM Hulu District.

Primary data collection techniques were carried out through participant observation during Catholic liturgical celebrations to capture the lived phenomenon and performance dynamics of Karo Gong integration directly. As a supporting research instrument, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted by co-researcher Kornelius Anton Kefi using guidelines designed to explore perceptions, cultural experiences, and the transformation of inculturation meanings. To achieve robust data triangulation, six key informants were purposively selected based on their specific roles within the parish community and local cultural structures. These informants represent four distinct operational perspectives: (1) pastoral leadership represented by the Parish Priest, Fr. Silverius Hutaaruk, focusing on theological and pastoral backgrounds; (2) parish administration and liturgical direction represented by Parish Pastoral Council member Calon Perangin-angin and liturgical music leader/organist Erik Sitepu, addressing decision-making processes, musical adaptation, and liturgical technical coordination; (3) indigenous cultural heritage represented by customary elder Opung Nini Karo, offering foundational insights into traditional Karo cosmology; and (4) the lived integration of faith and culture represented by Catholic laypersons who also serve as local cultural figures, Ketek Karo-karo and Nuah Ginting, capturing intergenerational responses, cultural

¹⁰ John W. Creswell, *Pendekatan Metode Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, Dan Campuran, (Judul Asli Research Design)*, ed. Achmad Fawaid; and Rianayati Kusmini (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2018).

identity, and the relevance of inculturation as a means of preserving tradition.¹¹

The empirical data collected from these interviews and field observations were processed using a systematic six-phase thematic analysis framework integrated with a contextual hermeneutic approach.¹² Following verbatim transcription and data familiarization, raw qualitative excerpts were systematically assigned initial codes capturing key operational phenomena, such as *animistic fear*, *symbolic purification*, *cosmological re-orientation*, and *actuosa participatio*. These codes were subsequently clustered into overarching thematic categories that delineate the structural transformation of Karo Gong music. To operationalize the contextual hermeneutic circle, the analysis dynamically juxtaposed the indigenous Karo cultural horizon—specifically the traditional cosmological meanings of the Gong within *Pemena* rituals—with the universal Catholic magisterial horizon articulated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Varietates Legitimae*. Furthermore, this hermeneutic framework extended beyond verbal statements to interpret non-verbal liturgical symbols, such as the spatial positioning of the Karo Gong near the sanctuary, sound dynamics, and worship postures, thereby demonstrating how symbolic purification mitigates syncretism while fostering authentic inculturation.

Discussion

Based on ethnographic research conducted at the Santa Katarina Tiga Juhar Parish throughout December 2025, it was found that the implementation of Karo Gong music in the liturgy is a tangible form of inculturation that connects Catholic faith with local indigenous wisdom. Rather than acting as a mere aesthetic ornament, the instrument serves as a sacred medium that strengthens the cultural identity of the

¹¹ Iskandar, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, 2009.

¹² Lexy J. Moleong, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, Edisi Revisi (Bandung: Remaja Rosdakarya, 2012).

congregation while deepening their active participation in the Eucharistic celebration.

Incarnational Theology and the Sacramental Foundations of Karo Gong Inculturation

In the intricate socio-cosmological structure of Karo indigenous society, traditional musical instruments—most prominently the Gong ensemble, which comprises the larger resonant *Gung* and the higher-pitched *Pungly*—are never treated merely as inanimate sound-producing tools or neutral aesthetic objects¹³. Rather, they function as vital cultural artifacts embedded with profound social, ritual, and metaphysical significance¹⁴. Within the indigenous worldview of *Pemena*, the Gong serves as an acoustic symbol of communal unity (*persada*) and a herald of collective life-cycle celebrations¹⁵. Beyond its horizontal social utility, however, the Gong carries an indispensable vertical-mystical dimension: it operates as a primary medium of symbolic communication designed to bridge the realm of human existence with the invisible supernatural sphere¹⁶. In traditional ritual contexts such as *Merdang Merdem* (the annual agricultural harvest festival) and specific apotropaic rites performed to recover individuals believed to be spirit-bound by supernatural entities (*umang*), the acoustic vibrations of the Gong were

¹³ Arita, “Mengenal Alat Musik Tradisional Karo: Memperkenalkan Rebab, Serunai Dan Gong,” *perpusteknik.com*, 2023, <https://perpusteknik.com/alat-musik-tradisional-karo/>.

¹⁴ Koentjaraningrat, *Pengantar Ilmu Antropologi* (Jakarta: Rineka Cipta, 1993); Agustian Ganda Putra Sihombing, “Penggunaan Alat Musik Tradisional Dalam Perayaan Liturgi: Inkulturasi Dan Pelestarian,” *goodnewsfromindonesia.id*, 2023, <https://www.goodnewsfromindonesia.id/2023/11/01/penggunaan-alat-musik-tradisional-dalam-perayaan-liturgi-inkulturasi-dan-pelestarian>.

¹⁵ Interview with Ketek Karo-karo (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025; Interview with Nuah Ginting (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

¹⁶ Lisbhet Same Lady Br Tarigan and Puspitawati, “Praktik Pemena Pada Etnik Karo Ditinjau Dari Analisis Pierre Bordieu Di Desa Kidupen Kabupaten Karo,” *MESIR: Journal of Management Education Social Sciences Information and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2024): 185–93. “*Pemena* merupakan kepercayaan pertama dalam masyarakat Karo, telah ada sebelum masuknya agama Kristen, Hindu, Islam dan agama lainnya belum masuk ke Tanah Karo dan tergolong pada aliran kepercayaan yang bersifat Animisme.

historically understood to possess inherent spiritual authority, capable of penetrating the cosmic veil, summoning ancestral spirits (*begu*), and harmonizing human life with unseen cosmic powers¹⁷.

When this instrument—steeped in centuries of animistic cosmology and ritual practice—is brought into the sanctuary of Saint Catherine Parish in Tiga Juhar, its introduction triggers a profound ontological and functional transformation that can only be properly comprehended through the lens of Incarnational theology and sacramental logic¹⁸. The theological foundation of this process rests upon the mystery of the Incarnation (*Incarnatio*), wherein the eternal Word (*Logos*) took on human flesh (*sarx*) and fully entered into a specific historical, linguistic, and cultural matrix—namely, first-century Palestinian Judaism—in order to redeem human nature from within¹⁹. By virtue of the Incarnation, human culture is neither intrinsically evil nor irredeemable; rather, it constitutes the necessary earthly vessel through which divine revelation is mediated²⁰. Following this Christological paradigm, the Catholic Church in Tiga Juhar does not seek to eradicate or suppress indigenous cultural artifacts like the Karo Gong²¹. Instead, the Church assumes these symbols into her liturgical life, subjecting them to a process of elevation (*elevatio*) and purification (*purificatio*) that frees them from their former animistic associations while preserving their authentic cultural resonance²².

Crucially, this transformative process is explicitly Christocentric²³. The acoustic resonance of the Karo Gong is radically decoupled from

¹⁷ Interview with Opung Nini Karo (Indigenous Cultural Elder), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tangga Batu Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025.

¹⁸ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus Di Bumi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2021): 25.

¹⁹ Konsili Vatikan II, "Sacrosanctum Concilium (Konstitusi Tentang Liturgi Suci)," *Seri Dokumen Gerejawi No. 9* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 1990), no. 37.

²⁰ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003).

²¹ Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, "Varietates Legitimae: De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione (Instruksi IV)," 1994.

²² Konsili Vatikan II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 38.

²³ Didimus Adventus Satrio, "Transformasi Liturgi Melalui Nyanyian Liturgi Inkulturatif," *Jurnal Pastoralia* 5, no. 2 (2024): 83–92.

spirit invocation and re-oriented “in Christ” and “through Christ,” who stands as the sole, supreme Mediator between God and humanity (1 *Timothy* 2:5)²⁴. Within the Catholic Eucharistic space, the Gong no longer functions as a ritual instrument intended to appease or summon *begu* or local deities; rather, its sonic presence is consecrated to serve the Triune God²⁵. The ancestral impulse of the Karo people to seek communion with the divine through music is not destroyed, but rather fulfilled and elevated in Christ²⁶. The instrument undergoes an ecclesiastical “baptism,” shifting its functional identity from an animistic ritual tool into a sanctified liturgical instrument (*sacramentali*) that disposes the worshipping assembly for personal and communal encounter with the living God²⁷.

Furthermore, this incarnational re-orientation provides the theoretical framework for conceptualizing the Karo Gong as a “musical sacrament” (*sacramentum secundarium* or sacred music).²⁸ While the Gong does not constitute one of the Seven Sacraments instituted by Christ to confer sanctifying grace *ex opere operato*, it operates within the broader sacramental economy of the Church as a powerful sacramental sign²⁹. According to Catholic liturgical theology, material realities—including sound, architecture, light, and gesture—are capable of becoming sensible channels through which invisible divine grace and heavenly majesty are rendered perceptible to human senses.³⁰ The deep, lingering reverberations of the Gong, when integrated into solemn

²⁴ Interview with Fr. Silverius Hutaauruk, OFMConv (Parish Priest of Saint Catherine Parish), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

²⁵ Interview with Calon Perangin-angin (Member of the Parish Pastoral Council), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

²⁶ Marihot Simanjuntak, “Inculturation Theology: Interpreting Tortor Batak Toba As A Participation In The Liturgical Celebration In The Archdiocese of Medan,” *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 7, no. 2 (2025): 9.

²⁷ Sacra Congregatio Rituum, “Musicam Sacram: Instruksi Tentang Musik Dalam Liturgi,” 1967.

²⁸ Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).

²⁹ Pusat Musik Liturgi, *Inkulturası Musik Liturgi IV* (Yogyakarta: Pusat Musik Liturgi [PML], 1999).

³⁰ Agustian Ganda Putra Sihombing, “Penggunaan Alat Musik Tradisional Dalam Perayaan Liturgi: Inkulturasi Dan Pelestarian,” *goodnewsfromindonesia.id*, 2023.

moments of the Mass, create a contemplative auditory atmosphere that disposes the intellect and affections of the faithful toward prayer, awe, and interior recollection³¹. In this manner, the Karo Gong fulfills its elevated role: it ceases to be a voice of mystical fear or spirit invocation, becoming instead an authentic vehicle of sacred praise that unifies indigenous identity with Catholic Eucharistic worship.³²

Biblical Precedents for Musical Transformation and Liturgical Praise

The re-interpretation and integration of the Karo Gong from an indigenous ritual artifact into a sacred liturgical instrument find rigorous theological and exegesis-based justification within Sacred Scripture.³³ Throughout salvation history, the worshipping community of God has continuously consecrated cultural instruments and musical expressions, purifying them from secular or pagan associations to serve as instruments of divine praise.³⁴ In the Old Testament, the Israelite cultic tradition routinely incorporated a full spectrum of acoustic instruments from surrounding Near Eastern cultures into temple liturgy³⁵. Psalm 150 provides the ultimate biblical mandate for instrumental variety in worship, commanding the faithful to praise Yahweh not only with vocal chants, but with trumpets (*shofar*), lutes, harps, timbrels, strings, pipes, and loud, clashing cymbals (*tseleselem*)—instruments whose metallic resonance directly parallels the acoustic timbre and function of the Karo Gong.³⁶

³¹ Interview with Erik Sitepu (Organist and Liturgical Music Director), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

³² Abdi Guna Sitepu, Cica Yola, and Br Sagala, "BANGUNAN GEREJA INKULTURATIF," *Vox Dei, Jurnal Teologi Dan Pastoral* 4 (2023): 225–37.

³³ Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).

³⁴ Konsili Vatikan II, "Sacrosanctum Concilium (Konstitusi Tentang Liturgi Suci)," *Seri Dokumen Gerejawi No. 9* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 1990), no. 37.

³⁵ Aji Rusmansyah, "Musik Liturgi Gereja Katolik" (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2010).

³⁶ *Psalms 150:1–6*; see also Pusat Musik Liturgi, *Inkulturas Musik Liturgi IV* (Yogyakarta: PML, 1999).

Furthermore, the solemn dedication of Solomon's Temple recorded in 2 Chronicles 5:11–14 demonstrates how the harmonious convergence of trumpeters, singers, and cymbals invoked the physical manifestation of divine presence (*Kabod Yahweh*), filling the house of God with a cloud of glory. In this biblical account, metallic percussion instruments were explicitly consecrated to proclaim God's eternal mercy (*"For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever"*).³⁷ Similarly, Psalm 81:3–4 establishes the sounding of resonant instruments as a divine statute and a solemn call to assemble the worshipping community for liturgical feasts. These Old Testament precedents illustrate that material instruments, regardless of their cultural origins, become sacred when set apart (*qadosh*) for divine service and public worship.³⁸

This dynamic alignment is further deepened by the profound biblical motif of the "new song" (*canticum novum*), which echoes consistently throughout the Psalter (Psalms 33:3; 40:4; 96:1; 144:9; 149:1) and reaches its eschatological climax in the New Testament (Revelation 5:9). Within biblical theology, singing a "new song" does not necessitate the complete destruction or abandonment of indigenous cultural forms; rather, it signifies giving a new soteriological orientation and Christological meaning to existing human cultural expressions.³⁹ When the Catholic Church in Tiga Juhar assigns a Gospel-centered meaning to the Karo Gong, she effectively sings a "new song" on Karo soil.⁴⁰ The ancestral instrument is no longer tied to animistic fears, but is elevated to proclaim the decisive victory of Christ over death and sin.⁴¹

³⁷ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus Di Bumi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2021).

³⁸ Sacra Congregatio Rituum, "Musicam Sacram: Instruksi Tentang Musik Dalam Liturgi," 1967.

³⁹ Didimus Adventus Satrio, "Transformisasi Liturgi Melalui Nyanyian Liturgi Inkulturatif," *Jurnal Pastoralia* 5, no. 2 (2024): 83–92.

⁴⁰ Interview with Fr. Silverius Hutaaruk, OFMConv (Parish Priest of Saint Catherine Parish), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁴¹ Marihot Simanjuntak, "Inculturation Theology: Interpreting Tortor Batak Toba As A Participation In The Liturgical Celebration In The Archdiocese of Medan," *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 7, no. 2 (2025): 9.

In his missionary and pastoral praxis, Saint Paul explicitly articulates the theological foundation for contextual adaptation by stating: “*I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel*” (1 Corinthians 9:19–23). The Church’s pedagogical approach in Tiga Juhar directly reflects this Pauline missionary impulse by adopting the familiar musical language and acoustic symbols of the Karo people in order to communicate the Gospel authentically without compromising Catholic dogmatic truth.⁴² Finally, this earthly, inculturated worship finds its ultimate iconographic archetype in the heavenly liturgy depicted in Revelation 4–5. In Saint John’s apocalyptic vision, celestial worship before the throne of God and the Lamb is communicated using familiar earthly instruments, golden bowls, incense, and cultural gestures of adoration.⁴³ This apocalyptic imagery confirms that redeemed human culture—including the resonant sound of the Karo Gong—does not perish, but is assumed into eternal heavenly worship to give glory to the Lamb.⁴⁴

Liturgical Integration: Memoria, Epiclesis, and the Prevention of Syncretism

Within the Eucharistic celebration at Saint Catherine Parish in Tiga Juhar, the integration of the Karo Gong performs a vital pneumatic and anamnestic function, elevating the auditory experience of the faithful into active participation in the mystery of salvation.⁴⁵ Musically and liturgically, the deep, reverberating cadence of the Gong supports *memoria*—the sacred, ritual remembrance (*anamnesis*) of Christ’s

⁴² Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, “Varietates Legitimae: De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione (Instruksi IV),” 1994.

⁴³ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003).

⁴⁴ Abdi Guna Sitepu, Cica Yola, and Br Sagala, “BANGUNAN GEREJA INKULTURATIF,” *Vox Dei, Jurnal Teologi Dan Pastoral* 4 (2023): 225–37.

⁴⁵ Konsili Vatikan II, “Sacrosanctum Concilium (Konstitusi Tentang Liturgi Suci),” *Seri Dokumen Gerejawi No. 9* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 1990), no. 48.

Paschal Mystery.⁴⁶ By accompanying solemn liturgical movements, such as the Gospel procession, the presentation of the gifts, and the Eucharistic acclamations, the acoustic resonance of the Gong acts as a mnemonic trigger.⁴⁷ It calls the assembly to recall not merely past historical events, but God's decisive, living interventions in human history fulfilled in Jesus Christ.⁴⁸ Simultaneously, its low, lingering timbre enhances the *epiclesis*, the solemn invocation of the Holy Spirit upon the Eucharistic gifts and the worshipping assembly.⁴⁹ The Gong's sound creates a contemplative sanctuary of awe, disposing the minds and hearts of the faithful to be transformed by the invisible power of the Holy Spirit during the consecration.⁵⁰

To maintain the theological integrity of this practice, the Church must critically discern and establish clear boundaries between authentic inculturation and the danger of syncretism.⁵¹ Authentic inculturation enriches the Christian faith by allowing the Gospel to inhabit and purify local cultural forms, whereas syncretism degrades Christian doctrine by attempting an uncritical fusion of Catholic dogma with incompatible animistic beliefs.⁵² Syncretism occurs when the original animistic efficacy—such as the superstition that the Gong's sound inherently possesses magical power to appease or summon *begu*—is retained alongside Catholic rites. In contrast, genuine inculturation purifies the symbolic form, stripping away former idolatrous or superstitious meanings

⁴⁶ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2003).

⁴⁷ Interview with Erik Sitepu (Organist and Liturgical Music Director), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁴⁸ Edward Foley, *Foundations of Christian Music* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006).

⁴⁹ Sacra Congregatio Rituum, "Musicam Sacram: Instruksi Tentang Musik Dalam Liturgi," 1967.

⁵⁰ Interview with Fr. Silverius Hutaaruk, OFMConv (Parish Priest of Saint Catherine Parish), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁵¹ Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, "Varietates Legitimae: De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione (Instruksi IV)," 1994, no. 47.

⁵² Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus Di Bumi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2021): 45.

and infusing the instrument with a strictly Christological and ecclesial purpose.⁵³

At Saint Catherine Parish, the threat of syncretism is actively prevented through three concrete, operational safeguards established by pastoral and theological discernment:⁵⁴

1. *Continuous Theological Catechesis:* The parish clergy provides ongoing instruction regarding the theology of symbols and liturgical music. Parishioners are explicitly taught that the Gong is not a conduit of supernatural spirit power, but a humanly crafted instrument consecrated solely to glorify the Triune God, thereby dismantling lingering animistic fears.⁵⁵
2. *Musical Deconstruction and Structural Adaptation:* The traditional, free, and ecstatic performance styles associated with *Pemena* spirit dances are strictly deconstructed. The Gong players modify their technique, adhering to disciplined, slower tempos and softened dynamic levels specifically arranged to harmonize with sacred Catholic hymnody.⁵⁶
3. *Pastoral Oversight and Rubrical Boundaries:* The Parish Pastoral Council enforces strict rubrical guidelines regarding when and how the Gong may be sounded. Its

⁵³ Lisbhet Same Lady Br Tarigan and Puspitawati, "Praktik Pemena Pada Etnik Karo Ditinjau Dari Analisis Pierre Bordieu Di Desa Kidupen Kabupaten Karo," *MESIR: Journal of Management Education Social Sciences Information and Religion* 1, no. 2 (2024): 185–93; Didimus Adventus Satrio, "Transformasi Liturgi Melalui Nyanyian Liturgi Inkulturatif," *Jurnal Pastoralia* 5, no. 2 (2024): 83–92.

⁵⁴ Interview with Calon Perangin-angin (Member of the Parish Pastoral Council), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁵⁵ Pusat Musik Liturgi, *Inkulturasi Musik Liturgi IV* (Yogyakarta: Pusat Musik Liturgi [PML], 1999); Interview with Ketek Karo-karo (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025.

⁵⁶ Arita, "Mengenal Alat Musik Tradisional Karo: Memperkenalkan Rebab, Serunai Dan Gong," *perpusteknik.com*, 2023; Interview with Erik Sitepu (Organist and Liturgical Music Director), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

usage is restricted to specific, dignified moments in the Mass—such as the solemn entrance, the Offertory, and the Recessional—ensuring that the instrument enriches the local character of worship without overshadowing or distracting from the centrality of the Word of God and the Eucharistic Sacrifice.⁵⁷

Pastoral Dynamics, Active Participation (*Actuosa Participatio*), and Cultural Identity

The pastoral journey of implementing Karo Gong music at Saint Catherine Parish in Tiga Juhar highlights a harmonious integration between Catholic ecclesiology and local indigenous identity.⁵⁸ The reception of this traditional instrument evolved through three distinct operational phases: pastoral acceptance, technical adaptation, and intergenerational reception. During the initial acceptance phase, Church leaders addressed lingering ambivalence among parishioners who associated traditional instruments with former animistic practices.⁵⁹ Through constructive dialogue and pastoral catechesis led by the parish priest and the Parish Pastoral Council, the community gradually recognized that adopting local cultural expressions is not a dilution of Catholic orthodoxy, but a continuation of the Church's historic inculturation legacy—most notably exemplified by the historical baptism of the pipe organ in Western liturgical history.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, *Varietates Legitimae*, no. 68; Marihot Simanjuntak, "Inculturation Theology: Interpreting Tortor Batak Toba As A Participation In The Liturgical Celebration In The Archdiocese of Medan," *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 7, no. 2 (2025): 9.

⁵⁸ Emanuel Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi: Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus Di Bumi Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: PT. Kanisius, 2021): 25.

⁵⁹ Interview with Fr. Silverius Hutaauruk, OFMConv (Parish Priest of Saint Catherine Parish), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.; Interview with Calon Perangin-angin (Member of the Parish Pastoral Council), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁶⁰ Konsili Vatikan II, "Sacrosanctum Concilium (Konstitusi Tentang Liturgi Suci)," *Seri Dokumen Gerejawi No. 9* (Jakarta: Dokpen KWI, 1990), no. 37; 120.

In the technical adaptation phase, close collaboration between the parish clergy, liturgical directors, and traditional musicians enabled a seamless transition.⁶¹ The expressive, unconstrained tempos characteristic of secular or *Pemena* ritual contexts were carefully calibrated to conform to sacred Catholic hymnody.⁶² Furthermore, spatial and acoustic adjustments were implemented: placing the Gong at a respectful distance near the sanctuary allowed its resonant vibrations to enrich the liturgical atmosphere without overpowering the vocal choir or the proclaimed Word of God. This meticulous technical discernment ensured that the instrument maintained its sacred, dignified function while honoring rubrical norms.⁶³

The resulting pastoral impact has proven profoundly transformative across generations, directly fulfilling the Second Vatican Council's imperative for *actuosa participatio*—the full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations.⁶⁴ For senior parishioners and customary elders (*tokoh adat*), hearing the familiar acoustic resonance of the Gong within the sanctuary conveys profound ecclesial validation.⁶⁵ It affirms that embracing the Catholic faith does not require the renunciation of their ancestral identity, establishing a lived reality wherein one can be fully Karo and fully Catholic.⁶⁶ Simultaneously, for younger Catholics (*orang muda Katolik*), this inculturated liturgy renders worship dynamic, contextual, and deeply meaningful. By bridging ancestral heritage with modern Christian life, the integration of Karo

⁶¹ Interview with Erik Sitepu (Organist and Liturgical Music Director), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.

⁶² Sacra Congregatio Rituum, "Musicam Sacram: Instruksi Tentang Musik Dalam Liturgi," 1967.

⁶³ Congregatio de Cultu Divino et Disciplina Sacramentorum, "Varietates Legitimae: De Liturgia Romana et Inculturatione (Instruksi IV)," 1994; Didimus Adventus Satrio, "Transformatisasi Liturgi Melalui Nyanyian Liturgi Inkulturatif," *Jurnal Pastoralia* 5, no. 2 (2024): 83–92.

⁶⁴ Konsili Vatikan II, *Sacrosanctum Consilium*, no. 14.

⁶⁵ Interview with Opung Nini Karo (Indigenous Cultural Elder), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tangga Batu Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025.

⁶⁶ Interview with Nuah Ginting (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar, December 2025.; Interview with Ketek Karo-karo (Parishioner and Karo Cultural Custodian), conducted by Kornelius Anton Kefi, Tiga Juhar Village, STM Hulu District, December 2025.

Gong music fosters a strong sense of ecclesial ownership, encouraging the youth to actively participate in parish ministry and safeguarding local cultural traditions against the homogenizing tides of secular modernization.⁶⁷

Conclusion

This study concludes that the inculturation of Karo Gong music at Saint Catherine Parish, Tiga Juhar, represents a successful theological and pastoral transformation that harmoniously bridges indigenous cultural identity with Catholic liturgical sacredness. The main findings demonstrate that through symbolic purification, Christocentric re-orientation (1 Tim 2:5), and technical adjustments in tempo and volume, the Karo Gong has been ontologically decoupled from its former animistic *Pemena* function—specifically the invocation of ancestral spirits (*begu*)—and elevated into a “musical sacrament” (*sacramentali*). Integrated into Eucharistic celebrations, the instrument enriches both *memoria* and *epiclesis*, fostering deep intergenerational engagement and fulfilling the Second Vatican Council's mandate for active, conscious participation (*actuosa participatio*).

These empirical and theological findings carry profound practical implications for the broader Catholic Church in Indonesia, particularly within culturally diverse, multi-ethnic dioceses. On a practical pastoral level, this study offers a tested framework demonstrating how indigenous instruments can be incorporated into Roman Rite liturgies without risking syncretism, provided that liturgical purification, strict rubrical boundaries, and continuous catechesis are maintained. Furthermore, it highlights the strategic necessity of musical inculturation as a vital pastoral tool to

⁶⁷ Abdi Guna Sitepu, Cica Yola, and Br Sagala, “BANGUNAN GEREJA INKULTURATIF,” *Vox Dei, Jurnal Teologi Dan Pastoral* 4 (2023): 225–37; Marihot Simanjuntak, “Inculturation Theology: Interpreting Tortor Batak Toba As A Participation In The Liturgical Celebration In The Archdiocese of Medan,” *Journal of Asian Orientation in Theology* 7, no. 2 (2025): 9.

preserve local indigenous heritage and counteract youth cultural alienation amid the rapid tides of secular modernization.

Building upon these findings, future research should advance both empirical and comparative trajectories within Asian contextual theology. Scholars are encouraged to undertake quantitative empirical inquiries to evaluate how the integration of traditional instruments directly influences parishioners' theological comprehension of Eucharistic mysteries and active participation rates across age demographics. Additionally, future studies should expand the geographical locus to conduct cross-cultural comparative analyses, contrasting the Karo Gong model in North Sumatra with other indigenous liturgical percussion models across the Indonesian archipelago, such as Javanese *Gamelan* or Manggarai *Cangkang* in Flores, thereby enriching the global discourse on liturgical inculturation.

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