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Incarnation Christology Offers Universal Salvation and Cultural Liberation for Catholic Torajan in South Sulawesi

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Abstract

The people of Toraja, South Sulawesi are known to have social stratification as part of their culture. Such stratification at the same time influenced the concept of salvation in their ancestral belief, Aluk To Dolo. Eternal salvation, in the concept of man's union with the highest God, Puang Matua, could only be obtained by those who have a high social class, Tana' Bulaan. Meanwhile, those who came from low social classes, in addition to having limited space in society, also culturally-religiously were difficult to obtain salvation. Using the literature method, this paper aims to provide a christological solution to this religio-cultural problem, especially after Christianity encountered Toraja culture. As a result, contextual christology provided an answer to this gap. The Son as the 'Word made flesh' brought salvation to the Torajan people in general with no more social stratification boundaries in the new understanding.

Keywords

Incarnation Christology, salvation, liberation, catholic, Toraja.

INTRODUCTION

Cultures are built on the basis of an understanding of the stories that develop in their society. Thomas Cooper, one of the pioneers of story theology, as written by Liku Ada', states that theology can be developed by listening to the stories of certain ethnic groups. This is supported by Bruno Borchet's statement in his understanding of mites (stories): "a mite is a story in which the common experiences of a people are compressed, and which answers the questions of human life".[1] Therefore, theology, as a part of human life based on the question of God's practical presence, can be juxtaposed with this understanding. C. S. Song, another pioneer of story theology,

[1] John Liku Ada', "Reinterpretasi Budaya Dalam Terang Injil: Menjelang Seabad Kekristenan Di Toraja," in *Reinterpretasi & Reaktualisasi Budaya Toraja, Refleksi Seabad Kekristenan Masuk Toraja* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Gunung Sopai, 2012), 21.

points out that story theology has been widely practiced by people in Asia.[2] This is because Asian culture was first and foremost about the stories of the ancestors who shaped civilization in the eastern world. There are three very important points emphasized by Song with regard to story theology. First, God deals with the concrete lives of people through life stories, which should be the raw material of theology.[3] Second, the incarnation of Christ becomes the centre of theology to lead to the application of theology in the Asian context.[4] Thirdly, the stories of people struggling for life and death as well as the stories of Jesus himself are part of the theology of story itself.[5] In essence, Song emphasized that God made flesh is at the heart of all Story Theology, even enriching Christians' understanding of Scripture.

There is one place in Indonesia that is strongly associated with Story Theology and has developed its Christian faith through stories that are essentially inherited from its ancestors. Toraja, a predominantly Christian region in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, is known for its interesting ceremonies and story-based culture. Uniquely, the salvation that Torajans understand and accept comes from a shift in understanding of the salvation story of their ancestral religion, *Aluk To Dolo*. However, it should be underlined that previously, salvation was exclusive. The messenger of the Creator in their understanding, *tomanurun*, was only able to bring salvation to those of high social class through the *dirapai'* ritual. Even though the Torajans are now Christians, it is difficult to get rid of the traces of salvation exclusivity and cultural attachment in the form of social stratification in the memory of the Torajans.

In support of Song Story Theology, the Council of Nicea (325) affirmed the teachings of the Christian faith with regard to the Son's status as truly God and man. This paper focuses on how the humanity of the Son, through the Incarnation, which is widely discussed by Athanasius and Hilarius to support the outcome of Nicea while countering the teachings of Arius provides a theological solution for Catholics in Toraja in understanding their faith deeply. Catholic faith is the focus of this paper's discussion because Catholic writers in Toraja discuss how the relationship between *tomanurun* and Christ - in theological understanding is then considered as the true *Tomanurun*. The Christology of Incarnation is the main solution in answering the

[2] S. C. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation To Story Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), xi.
[3] C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perpective* (New York: Orbis Book, 1984), 6.
[4] Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perpective*, 9.
[5] Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perpective*, 16–18.

problem of salvation and social stratification in Torajan society vis-à-vis the Christian faith. This is important because without the Incarnation of the Son, salvation would not touch all humans in Toraja due to the religious and structural constructs that prevent many Torajans from reaching salvation.

CONTENTS

Salvation Story in *Aluk To Dolo*

Located in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, Toraja is one of the oldest ethnic groups in Indonesia with proto-Malay origins. Batak and Nias of Sumatra, Sasak of Lombok Island, and Dayak of Kalimantan are often identified with this ethnic group. Toraja in this ethnic group series was believed to have originated from the Dongson people located in North Vietnam who migrated to Indonesia. Strong evidence in favour of this fact is that drums were found in the Selayar Iland, South Sulawesi that had images of houses similar to the current Toraja traditional house, *tongkonan*.[6] As one of the oldest ethnic groups in Indonesia, Toraja also has a polytheistic animist belief system called *Aluk To Dolo*.

As the name implies, *aluk* meaning rules and *to dolo* meaning ancestors, *Aluk To Dolo* is an ancestral heritage from the ancestors of the Toraja people that contains a set of rules and rituals.[7] The main object of worship in this belief is to *Puang Matua* as the supreme god, *deata-deata* or gods, and ancestors. The honour was done by giving offerings in the form of food offerings. Performing prescribed rituals, such as *Rambu Solo'* (death ceremony) and *Rambu Tuka'* (thanksgiving ceremony) are part of the realisation of the *Aluk To Dolo* teachings. Although some Torajans are now Christianised, there are about 3.8% of them who still maintain this belief. The formalisation of Aluk To Dolo only happened around the 1950s and its legacy can be seen in the thanksgiving and death traditions that Torajans still practice today.[8]

As a religion, *Aluk To Dolo* has a salvation story that influences subsequent rituals. This story is called *eran dilangi'* which can be interpreted as "the ladder to the sky". In the Torajan oral scripture, *Passomba Tedong*, which is read for several hours

[6] Shaifuddin Bahrum and Joni S. Lisungan, *Bangunan Sosial Tongkonan* (*Sebuah Kajian Terhadap Organisasi Sosial Tradisional Di Tana Toraja*) (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Nilai Budaya, Seni, dan Film, 2009), 54.

[7] L. T. Tangdilintin, *Toraja Dan Kebudayaannnya* (Tana Toraja: Yayasan Lepongan Bulan, 1981), 72.

[8] Johanes Raymond Haranto, "Wujud Sinkretisme Religi Aluk Todolo Dengan Agama Kristen Protestan," *Jurnal Teologia* 25, no. 2 (2014): 13–14.

at the inauguration of the *tongkona*n, this story is clearly recounted.[9] The general image of humanity in this salvation story is in a situation where the two main elements of *Aluk To Dolo*, namely *aluk*, have been explained earlier, and *pemali* (prohibitions), apply. Together with these two elements, humans were brought down directly from heaven by *Puang Matua* through a link between heaven (heaven) and earth called *eran dilangi'*, a ladder to the sky. At that time, humans lived in harmony, and they could meet Puang Matua directly to ask him for guidance.

The harmony between Puang Matua and humans was later broken by humans themselves. A human named Londong Di Rura insisted on going against Puang Matua's rules by marrying off a pair of his own children in order to preserve their inheritance. This act was not tolerated by *Puang Matua* himself and was considered a great offence.[10] *Puang Matua*'s wrath resulted in *eran dilangi* being overthrown by himself. This fall occurred at the same time as the wedding of the two children. Those present were crushed by the ladder and died, some of them became stones, others were lost to the earth. From then on, man's direct relationship with the Creator became very distant, although He never abandoned man altogether. During this time, the belief arose that after death, the human spirit would go to a spirit world called *puya*. It is believed that this world is located on earth, right where *eran dilangi'* used to stand. *puya* for Torajans is not heaven, but life in it is believed to be more genuine than life in the world.[11] To restore man's relationship with the Creator, Puang Matua sent a *tomanurun* (messenger), named Tamboro Langi', who descended directly from the sky bringing a set of safety rules to the Toraja people. The rules are in the form of a supreme death ritual called *dirapai*'.[12] Those who perform this ceremony were guaranteed to enter heaven and unite with Puang Matua and the ancestors. In this case, salvation is understood not only to be limited to *puya*, but also unity with *Puang*

[9] Moses Eppang B. A., *Passomba Tedong* (*Upacara Keselamatan Toraja*) (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1990), 32.

[10] In the version told by Marampa', *Puang Matua* knocked down the stairs to the sky because his confidant, *Saratu' Sambung Pio*, stole *Puang Matua's te'tekan bulaan* (golden lighter). A. T. Marampa', *Mengenal Toraja* (Marampa', 1979), 42.

[11] John Liku Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Kristus* (Yogykarta: Penerbit Gunung Sopai, 2014), 182–183.

[12] *Dirapai*' comes from the word *rapa'* which means silence, calm. In the context of a death ceremony, *dirapai'* is a time when people, up to thousands of people, come to sit quietly for a few days. The family will serve them a meal for free. From the side of the deceased, the spirit will be at peace because of the assurance of safety through the ceremony. This is symbolised by the sacrifice of a large number of animals, especially buffaloes. This large number of sacrifices is a condition of safety in dirapai'. Another term used for this ceremony is *rapasan*. Tangdilintin, *Toraja Dan Kebudayaannnya*, 130.

Matua. The union of the human spirit with the Creator in *Aluk To Dolo* terms is called *membali puang*.

Problems of Salvation and Social Stratification in *Aluk To Dolo*

Death ceremonies in *Aluk To Dolo* are categorised under one term called *Rambu Solo'*. All kinds of death ceremonies, including *dirapai'* as the highest ceremony, fall into this category. It is important to understand that the performance of death rituals, apart from being a requirement for Torajans as adherents of *Aluk To Dolo*, is also an attempt to fight for the safety of the departed spirits. Those who are eulogised, marked by the slaughter of sacrificial animals, are believed to gain peace of mind, either into *puya* or heaven.[13] A person's soul will wander the world without direction if they are not buried with a funeral.

The distinction between *puya* and heaven indicates a distinction in the performance of the ritual and who performs it. Earlier it was mentioned that *dirapai'* guarantees eternal salvation to Toraja people who perform the ceremony. However, as a condition of performing the ceremony, only those Torajans with the highest social caste are allowed to practice *dirapai'*. Tangdilintin mentions that there are four tana' (classes) in the social stratification of Torajan society as well as part of the implementation of the rules in *Aluk To Dolo*.[14] Firstly, *Tana' Bulaan* are classified as the highest nobility. The descendants of the *tomananurun* are included in this social class. The second is *Tana' Bassi*, those who belong to the middle noble class, including officials and servants of the noble class. The third is *Tana' Karurung*, those who are classified as free people. And the fourth is *Tana' Kua-kua*, those who are classified as *kaunan* or slaves. Both *Tana' Karurung* and *Tana' Kua-Kua* serve *Tana' Bulaan* and *Tana' Bassi*. [15] In the practice of the *Rambu Solo'* ceremony, as well as other ceremonies, this social stratification determines a person's role. For example, in a death ceremony, the *to parengnge*' or customary leader must at least be from *Tana' Bassi*, while the *to mebalun* or bathers and dressers must be those from Tana' Kua-Kua.

[13] Stanislaus Sandarupa, *Life and Death of The Toraja People, an Intorduction to Toraja Culture and A Guide to Places of Interest* (Ujung Pandang: CV Tiga Taurus, 1984), 52.

[14] Tangdilintin, *Toraja Dan Kebudayaannnya*, 202.

[15] Risna Purwati Pelen and A. K. Sampe Asang, "Rapasan Sundun: Suatu Tinjauan Teologis Tentang Makna Rapasan Sundun Dan Kontekstualisasi Pemaknaannya Dalam Kehidupan Warga Jemaat Sion Batupela' Klasis Sasi Utara Lembang Bangkelekila'," *Kinaa: Jurnal Teologi* 5, no. 2 (2019): 20.

Looking at the social stratification above provides an understanding that the application of the teachings of *Aluk To Dolo* as a religious life is closely related to social life. It can be said that social stratification is both a social and religious aspect of Torajan life. The reality shows that those who can implement *dirapai'* are socially classified as *Tana' Bulaan*. Then, those who cannot apply *dirapai'* can only perform ordinary death ceremonies, without the sacrifice of many buffaloes, even though they are economically able to do so.[16] This differentiation in ability due to stratification also shows the differentiation in the 'quality of salvation' obtained by each Torajan human being. While the spirits of *Tana' Bulaan* enjoy union with the Creator in heaven, those who do not belong to *Tana' Bulaan* only enjoy the afterlife in *puya*. Indeed, those in *puya*, in Ada''s view, wait to receive eternal salvation from *Puang Matua*. Thus, salvation in *Aluk To Dolo* is not universal and Torajans are constrained by social stratification that limits true salvation.

Understanding Incarnation Christology in the Nicene Context

The Council of Nicaea (325) was a major moment in the development of Christology in the Church. Arius (256-336), as a figure who was opposed in this first ecumenical council, initiated his views on the relationship between the two persons in Trinity, Father and the Son, as the object of this main discussion. He opposed the doctrine of the trinity that developed in the teachings of the early Church. His explanation, which emphasised absolute monotheism, was formulated to provide a distinction between the nature (*ousia*) of the Father and the Son.[17] In his view, which obscures the understanding of Christology and rejects Trinitarian teaching, only the Father can be called God because only He can be called *aghenetos* (unborn). Anyone who falls outside this standard cannot be called God. This statement was used by Arius to reduce the divine status of the Son because for him, the Son was born from the Father by the Father's own will. Therefore, the Son has no *ousia* similarity with the

[16] Tangdilintin, *Toraja Dan Kebudayaannnya*, 206–207.

[17] The use of the word *ousia* (essence) here needs to be understood more deeply. In a concrete sense, *ousia* can refer to a specific person. Applying this to the Father and the Son can make the understanding fall on the personal unity between the Father and the Son. In a generalised sense, *ousia* can refer to both divinity and humanity. If placed at the level of divinity then the humanity between the Father is acceptable. *Ousia* in this sense is used in the Nicene Creed in part: **"begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father".** Agus Widodo, *Pokok-Pokok Kristologi Patristik* (Yogyakarta: Sanata Dharma University Press, 2024), 62.

Father and is not God Himself even though according to Arius he is the Son of God[18] who has differences with other creations.[19] Nicaea ended with the creed which formulated that Jesus Christ is truly God. Nicea affirmed that Jesus Christ was truly God-born, not a mere creation as Arius taught. While Arius affirmed that the Son was created out of nothing, Nicea affirmed that the Son was eternally born from the essence of the Father so as to be one with the Father in eternity.

The understanding of the Son as a person of God who was born, not created, was further clarified by the appearance of Athanasius as a defender of the Nicene teachings, which at that time continued to experience opposition even though the council officially ended with the Nicene Creed. Athanasius, who was elected bishop of Alexandria after the death of Bishop Alexandre (328), defended the Nicene doctrine with his Christology of Incarnation. In *De Incarnatione*, he wrote:

He became human that we might become divine (*theopoiēthōmen*); and He revealed Himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and He endured insults from human beings that we might inherit incorruption (*De Incarnatione, 54*).[20]

Athaniasius saw a critical danger in Arius' separation of the Son from the Father that made the Son's salvation impossible. The statement 'He became humankind that we might become divine' summarizes his idea of salvation as a process of deification. Such salvation is only possible when the Son, who is true God, becomes human through the incarnation and, according to Anatolios, separates the ontological gulf between God and created humanity.[21] In staunch opposition to Arian teaching, Athanasius, in an attempt to defend the orthodoxy of the Nicene Creed, in *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* stated: "One who does not hold the doctrines of Arius necessarily holds and intends the doctrines of the council" (*De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* 20).

[18] Arius did not deny some elements of the earlier teaching that the Son was also called God, but he subordinated the Son far enough that he was accused of degrading the Word and wisdom of God. David M. Gwynn, "Athanasius of Alexandria," in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Patristics* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2015), 112.

[19] These differences are (1) the Son was directly created by the Father, while other creations were created by the Father through the mediation of the Son, (2) the Son was created by the Father before time and before all ages, while other creations were created after time.. Widodo, *Pokok-Pokok Kristologi Patristik*, 59.

[20] Gwynn, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 114.

[21] Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (London: Routledge, 1999), 42.

Here Athanasius' main emphasis to strengthen his teaching on the incarnation is for the sake of human salvation. In the context of human sinfulness, starting from *De Incarnatione* 13, Athanasius asserted that to save humanity, the incarnation is the only way worthy of God. He said this to counter the conception that the incarnation was not worthy of God and therefore unacceptable.[22] Continuing to emphasize the *homoousios* between the Father and the Son in his teaching, Athanasius used the concept of deification as part of his Christology of Incarnation, whereby man can be saved because the Son elevated man's status to divinity through the incarnation of the Son into man.[23]

Incarnation Theology as a Solution for Universal Salvation and Structural Liberation for Torajans

The large number of Christians in Toraja today indicates the success of evangelism there. In the ears of most people who have known Toraja, they are quite aware that people associate Toraja with Christianity. Even today, the practice of the heritage of *Aluk To* Dolo is very visible in Toraja even though those who practice it are Christians. Toraja Christians in this case have received a new understanding of the ceremonies that originated from their ancestral religion.

There is a shift in understanding in the implementation of the *Aluk To Dolo* ceremony after it was Christianised with the arrival of Dutch missionaries. Previously, it is necessary to understand two terms to refer to the *Aluk To Dolo* heritage ceremonies, namely aluk and ada'. When talking about all types of rituals in the context of *Aluk To Dolo* the religious element becomes very strong. The correct word to describe this is *aluk* (teaching) - anything that smacks of traditional religion falls into this category. After attempting to purify Torajan culture, Protestant missionaries, who first came to Toraja before the Catholics, decided to remove the *aluk* element from the death ceremony (*Rambu Solo'*) in *Aluk To Dolo*, and even forbade any form of thanksgiving ceremony (*Rambu Tuka'*) except harvest thanksgiving and *tongkonan* inauguration while still removing the *aluk* element.[24] As a result, Toraja Christians continue to perform both ceremonies within the limits of understanding as part of *ada'* (custom or culture). In general, the implementation of these ceremonies in the present context is seen as Torajan culture.

[22] Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought*, 43–44.
[23] Gwynn, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 113.
[24] Ada', "Reinterpretasi Budaya Dalam Terang Injil: Menjelang Seabad Kekristenan Di Toraja," 27.

Although Christianity with its various teachings is considered to have influenced most aspects of life in Toraja, cultural practices are still strongly influenced by elements in *Aluk To Dolo*. For example, death ceremonies are still applied based on the division of social classes in the community which of course is based on the provisions applied in *Aluk To Dolo*. However, Christianity is not strong enough to eliminate this element in society. Given the limited understanding of the application of Christian faith among the Torajans in relation to the performance of traditional ceremonies, this section aims to provide a theological solution to this issue. Salvation in *Aluk To Dolo* is no longer embraced by Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, as it has been abolished by Christianization. Torajan Christians have come to believe that the only salvation is in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, elements of religiosity that provide certain boundaries are still very strong in the implementation of ceremonies in Toraja. Johannes Liku Ada' in his book *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Kristus* supports the application of this element of religiosity in the implementation of Torajan culture. According to him, separating the element of religiosity (*aluk*) in funeral ceremonies, in particular, means emptying the ceremony from its true basis.[25] Because of this understanding, the funeral ceremony becomes a cultural practice and preservation that only considers the material aspect rather than the religiosity inherited by *Aluk To Dolo* - performing certain ceremonies to show the ability of the family in terms of wealth.[26]

However, without detracting from the religious aspects emphasised by Liku Ada', and by linking to the Christology of the Incarnation discussed earlier, the authors tries to provide an in-depth understanding of how the Incarnation Christology provides a clearer picture of how Torajan Christians, especially Catholics, should interpret the Christian faith in their cultural context. The Catholic faith is considered because in relation to *tomanurun* and the Catholic faith, some catholic writers have tried to link them. This paper does not intend to refute the results of those writings but tries to provide a clearer picture from another perspective.

Liku Ada' strongly Christianizes the figure of *tomanurun* as the Christ that Torajan Catholics have been waiting for, long before Christianity arrived. From the perspective of the incarnation, as the way of salvation for humanity, *tomanurun* failed and cannot be attributed to God the Son. As a messenger, *tomanurun* was sent by God

[25] Ada', *Aluk To Dolo Menantikan Kristus*, 187–188.
[26] Ada', "Reinterpretasi Budaya Dalam Terang Injil: Menjelang Seabad Kekristenan Di Toraja," 29.

directly from heaven, was not born, and was regarded by the Torajans at that time as a demigod.[27] Thus, despite bringing new rituals of salvation to the Torajans, he was unable to save them universally. Only those considered as *Tana' Bulaan*, his own descendants, could be saved. It could be argued that he was only a messenger for the nobility. Meanwhile, citing the thoughts of Gregory Nazianzen in relation to the Incarnation in Athanasius' writings, the *logos* who is the Son must put on humanity in order to save humanity itself.[28] Only through the incarnation - and God made it possible through it - can God be human to save humanity. Thus, because through the incarnation, the Son could 'humble himself and become like men' (Phil 2:7-8) whom he saved through the passion he, and humanity, endured. Such salvation could only be given to mankind by One who, in addition to taking on fully human form, was also fully God. Therefore, according to Athanasius, the incarnation also became a process of deification for man because he was raised by the Son, who came from divinity to divinity itself.[29] *Tomanurun*, although he had divinity in him based on *Aluk To Dolo*, could not bring salvation because he did not feel fully human. *Dirapai'* become devoid of religiosity vis-à-vis the Catholic faith. So in this context, the Son cannot be equated with *tomanurun* because of the difference in the status of divinity and humanity and the quality of salvation it brings. While *tomanurun*, in Aluk To Dolo's understanding, is half-divine and not fully human, the Son is truly God and human. It is this title that brings universal salvation to the people of Toraja.

Since obtaining eternal salvation in *Aluk To Dolo* is determined by *tana*', with the change in understanding of salvation after the entry of Christianity, especially when seen from the perspective of Incarnation Christology, once salvation is interpreted as universal, the application of *tana'* is also influenced. The Son who became human brings liberation not only from sin, which is part of being human, but also from the worldly things that shackle the world. This is also the consequence of the Catholic faith of the Torajans. Because the Catholic faith has given to those - who are in the lower social class and cannot afford the salvation ceremonies in *Aluk To Dolo* - then indirectly social stratification no longer applies in society. Finally, the Son through his incarnation gives universal salvation to Torajans and gives cultural freedom to all Torajans, without exception, who have faith in Him.

[27] Tangdilintin, *Toraja Dan Kebudayaannnya*, 28.
[28] Widodo, *Pokok-Pokok Kristologi Patristik*, 81.
[29] Gwynn, "Athanasius of Alexandria," 113.

CONCLUSSION

Exploring the meaning of salvation from the perspective of incarnation theology further clarifies the life of Catholic faith in Toraja. Understanding Jesus as the Son who is truly God and human gives Torajans the true meaning of salvation. Salvation is no longer understood as something exclusive - those who are religiously and culturally incapable of attaining eternal salvation - but rather universally regardless of the rituals and social class of the Torajan people. Therefore, for Torajans who have believed in Christ, the death ceremony or *Rambu Solo'* should be seen as a valuable cultural heritage. Social stratification, which is still seen in the ritual, should be further discussed to make it more in line with the Christian faith.

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