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Intercultural Interpretation of the "Good Shepherd" within the Indonesian Context

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Abstract

Inculturation permeates the life of the Catholic Church since its conception, making it stay relevant and creative with its evangelising mission amidst a multicultural world. This paper is a study of inculturation within the discipline of biblical exegesis. After a brief explanation about the essence of inculturation, it explores some forms of popular intercultural exegesis or contextual hermeneutics which was developed in Africa. One of them is the "four-legged stool" method designed by Elizabeth Mburu. We applied Mburu's method to interpret the image of the "good shepherd" which was used by Jesus in John's Gospel narrative (Jn. 10:1-12), a familiar passage to most Indonesian Catholics. Mburu's method puts the metaphor align with the theological, literary, and historical context of the local reader. In this case, the research considers the meaning of "a good shepherd" understood through the Indonesian mindset. As a result, the biblical metaphor gained extra meaning from native roots.

Keywords

inculturation, contextual hermeneutics, four-legged stool, good shepherd.

INTRODUCTION

Inculturation in the Catholic Church can be summarized as a process of encounter between the Christian faith and local culture. This process aims to unite the Christian faith with the local culture so that it becomes a united and living unity. Inculturation does not mean transforming Christian faith into local culture, but rather trying to find harmony with local culture. In the process of inculturation, the universal values of Christian faith are combined with the good and noble values of local culture.

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The aim of this paper is to explain biblical inculturation. After this introduction, a general overview of the meaning of inculturation will be laid out, including the history of inculturation, the accompanying Church documents about it, and the meaning given by the Church to inculturation. Afterwards, this paper will focus on the forms of inculturation within the scope of biblical exegesis. We will first explore the variety of inculturative exegesis that had been developed in Africa. The African context was chosen because there are sufficient studies that systematically review the models or methods of inculturative biblical exegesis on the continent. Secondly, we shall adapt one of the models of exegesis developed in Africa to the Indonesian context. We shall examine the possibility of an inculturative interpretation of the phrase "good shepherd" (John 10).

METHOD

The research methods used in this study are literature study and exegesis. In the literature study, the researcher tries to explore the theme to be raised through various literacies that discuss the theme, such as Catholic Church documents, recent journal articles, and literature that contains the theme.

Next, the researcher conducted an exegesis method on the chosen theme. In this case, exegesis refers to the commentary or interpretation of biblical texts to elucidate obscure matters and seek the relationship between a word, verse, or passage, and other words, verses, or passages in order to determine its exact meaning. Therefore, modern exegesis utilizes textual criticism and linguistic expertise. Specifically, the researcher will use the exegetical model introduced by African exegetes Chris Ukachukwu Manus, Elizabeth Mburu, and Elie Sikamosi-Nzoloko. The model is then applied in accordance with the context used by the researcher, namely the Indonesian context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Inculturation is one of the basic concepts of the Catholic Church that has been massively developed since the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council, through several of its documents, emphasized the importance of inculturation in order to spread the Christian faith throughout the world. In practice, inculturation is a complex process and takes a long time due to the cultural elements involved.[1]

[1] Emanuel Martasudjita, Teologi Inkulturasi; Perayaan Injil Yesus Kristus di Bumi Indonesia (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2021), vi.

Therefore, inculturation is an important process to undertake in order for the Catholic Church to grow and take deeper roots in society. In this section, we will try to outline the basic understanding of inculturation in terms of Church history, Church documents, meaning, and practice, especially in the inculturation of Scripture.

Inculturation in General

There are various definitions of inculturation, including how it relates to the Gospel and culture. Etymologically, "inculturation" is a combination of the Latin word "*in"* and *"cultura"* (the verb form of *cultura* is *colere*, meaning to cultivate the soil). The word *cultura* is commonly translated as culture. Based on this explanation, inculturation can literally be defined as the process of entering a certain culture or different cultures. The term inculturation then has a very specifically Christian meaning because it was developed in the context of Christian theology which refers to the process of the Gospel encountering and entering many different cultures.[2]

The Church also has a dynamic understanding of culture, which cannot be separated from evangelization. The first important thing to look at in relation to the notion of inculturation is an understanding of culture, both the concept, some models of approaches in cultural studies, and semiotic cultural analysis.[3]

In general, when talking about the practice of inculturation, Christians immediately think of the inculturation taking place in the field of liturgy. For example, when the priest presides over the Eucharist wearing traditional vesments from the local culture or when the songs for mass is sung in the vernacular language. From this overly simplified association, the broader understanding of inculturation is not given much thought.[4]

From a historical perspective, the term inculturation was coined within missiology or mission theology.[5] In the theological sense, the term inculturation was popularized by Joseph Mason SJ, a Belgian Professor who taught at the Gregorian University of Rome. Mason wrote: "Today there is a more urgent need for Catholicism to inculturate in various forms." The term inculturation had already been used by

[2] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 16.
[3] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 1.
[4] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 4.
[5] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 11.

Joseph Mason's teacher, Pierre Charles SJ, in 1953, but his teacher used it in the sense of enculturation.[6]

One of the important moments related to inculturation was when the Bishops of Asia held a meeting (attended by 180 Bishops) to welcome Pope Paul VI in 1970 in Manila. The importance of inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia was a key point of the meeting. Therefore, the term inculturation has been used in the forum of the Bishops' meeting in Asia since 1970. However, the term inculturation used in this early document of the Asian Bishops is still unclear because there are several other terms used such as adaptation, acculturation, incarnation, indigenization, and not yet as a unified theological understanding.[7]

In 1974 at the Synod on Evangelization in Rome, the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar made a very clear and unequivocal statement about the need for inculturation. However, they did not use the term inculturation explicitly and clearly. On the other hand, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) in 1974, has also urged the need for an increasingly indigenous and inculturated Church.[8]

At the international level, the term "inculturation" became a common theological vocabulary when it was used by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ in the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (SJ) in 1974-1975. However, the term inculturation was first officially used in universal Church documents in the closing document of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in 1977, namely *Ad populum Dei nuntius* (art. 5). Furthermore, the term inculturation began to be used in papal documents two years later when Pope John Paul II mentioned it in the Apostolic Exhortation Catechesi Tradendae (art. 53). Since then, the word inculturation, both in official Church documents and theological writings, has become a commonly used term within the Catholic Church.[9]

The Practice of Inculturation in Exegesis: Learning from African Exegetes

Having explained the concept of inculturation broadly in terms of church history, church documents, and its meaning (origin of the word), in this section we will give a concrete example of the practice of inculturation. The concrete event we have chosen is the practice of biblical inculturation that took place in Africa by three

[6] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 12.
[7] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 12.
[8] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 12.
[9] Martasudjita, *Teologi Inkulturasi*, 13.

African exegetes. They are Chris Ukachukwu Manus, Elizabeth Mburu, and Elie Sikamosi-Nzoloko. We chose Africa because Africa and Asia are two continents that have received a lot of attention if we want to see the practice of inculturation in a more tangible way.

Intercultural exegesis in Africa cannot be separated from the context of Scripture study there. The main motive of Africanized Scripture study is the desire to make the Bible "related to life". The aim is to bring about spiritual awakening and social transformation (justice). Therefore, interpretation falls within the scope of "theology of identity " (focusing on inculturation) and "theology of bread" (focusing on liberation).[10]

On the one hand, African-style Scripture studies are characterized as "inclusive" because they involve various communities of interpreters (experts, non-experts, men, women, laity, clergy). On the other hand, the inclusiveness is also shown by the use of various methods of interpretation (historical-critical, literary, and new-style hermeneutics).

In the field of NT interpretation, the publication of the anthology *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa* (Getui et al. 2001) as a result of the Hammanskraal Conference (Pretoria, 1999) was a significant step. The book emphasizes the importance of the interaction of the Gospel and local culture, while still recognizing the universality of the Gospel message. This is "contextual hermeneutics."

In 2004, Mugambi and Smit's Text and Context was published which added several specific methodologies to contextual hermeneutics, including; reconstruction hermeneutics (interpretation that responds to the economic-political-religious-moral crisis facing Africa), rainbow hermeneutics (interpretation that bridges Western modernism and the African "Renaissance"), ubuntu hermeneutics (interpretation that emphasizes community). Apart from those listed in the book, there are still other methodologies that continue to be studied in order to become more mature. For example, semoya hermeneutics (interpretation centered on "restoration"), liberation hermeneutics (interpretation connected to poverty alleviation), womanist hermeneutics (interpretation from a woman's perspective), and others.[11]

[10] J. C. Loba-Mkole, "The New Testament and Intercultural Exegesis in Africa," *Journal for the Study of New Testament* 30/1 (2007), 7.

[11] Loba-Mkole, "The New Testament," 10.

Chris Ukachukwu Manus applies inculturation methods and procedures to the interpretation of some New Testament texts by combining historical, literary and social approaches in the exegesis process. Ukachukwu distinguishes between folklore inculturation approaches and inculturation hermeneutics. The procedure of folklore inculturation involves: establishing the original text and context of the biblical text, analyzing the text, presenting the characters in it, pointing out conflict data in the text, and identifying symbolism present in the text along with equivalents in local folklore or culture. While the inculturation hermeneutic procedure involves the following: selecting the biblical text, presenting the problem briefly, justification of the hermeneutics of inculturation, analyzing the context of the current actors, analyzing the socio-historical context of the biblical story, exegetical analysis of the text, interpretation of the text, contextualization, conclusion, notes, and references.[12]

Another concrete application of inculturation in the process of exegesis is provided by Elizabeth Mburu. Mburu offers a hermeneutic model of inculturation in exegesis through a "four-legged stool" format. The format is appropriate for the African context, so it can be applied to exegesis of both Old and New Testament texts. The four legs must run in parallel which include: the African context, the theological context, the literary context, and the historical and cultural context. The four elements are the legs of the chair, while the seat of the chair relates to the application in everyday contexts. Thus, the four legs can represent two components: the African context and the biblical texts understood in their theological, literary, historical, and cultural contexts.[13]

Elie Sikamosi-Nzoloko uses an inculturation exegesis that combines narrative analysis and translation criticism of the Gospel of John (4:1-42). What is interesting about Nzoloko's exegesis is that his inculturation model primarily includes the culture of the original Bible (John's narrative of the Samaritan Woman) and the Lingala translation of the Bible. Nzoloko pays close attention to any translation of the original text into the local language in which he uses the new Lingala Bible translation.[14]

Based on the exegetical experiences of the African exegetes above, it can be clearly seen that inculturation is not only a matter limited to the liturgy. Inculturation

[12] J.C. Loba-Mkole, "Intercultural constructions of the New Testament: Epistemological foundations," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77/2 (2021), 4.

[13] Loba-Mkole, "Intercultural constructions of the New Testament," 4.

[14] Loba-Mkole, "Intercultural constructions of the New Testament," 5.

can be done more broadly, one of which is in exegesis. The three African exegetes really pay attention to the context, culture, history, language, and even the native language of the local community in translating and interpreting the teachings of the Catholic Church contained in the Holy Scriptures. The application of the inculturation process in exegesis that applies the above elements becomes a means of sharpening the interpretation of reflection that does not only fall within the framework of translation. Ultimately, the process of exegesis becomes more relevant and contextualized for the recipients of the Gospel.

The Practice of Scriptural Inculturation in the Indonesian Context

This section will present the practice of inculturation exegesis with Mburu's "four-legged stool" model. The text chosen is John 10:1-21, where Jesus compares Himself to a "good shepherd." The passage was chosen because the image of God as a shepherd is quite familiar in the minds of the faithful in Indonesia. Exploring the Indonesian context, theological context, literary context, and historical and cultural context will enrich the meaning of the passage.

"Good Shepherd" in the Context of the Old and New Testaments

One of the oldest figures we can find in ancient history is the figure of the good shepherd who shepherds his flock. In the context of Christianity today, the shepherd is often associated with the servant of the Church and the people as the flock being shepherded. This kind of depiction or expression has actually been used since ancient times to describe great rulers, kings, and even deities.

In the Old Testament era, most people in the Middle East made a living by herding sheep and goats. They used sheep and goats as commodities to barter for the necessities of daily life. Apart from buying daily necessities, livestock commodities could also be used as a form of tax payment.[15]

It is also known that the shepherds of that era were nomads. They moved around because they had to find good and fertile grazing areas for their sheep. The job of finding food is not an easy thing, especially when the animals are in pregnancy, have just given birth, and are also breastfeeding. In addition to being responsible for meeting food needs, shepherds are also responsible for protecting their flocks from

[15] Ernest Wright, "The Good Shepherd," *The Biblical Archaeologist* (1939): 44.

wild animals, thieves, and extreme weather. Every animal must be taken care of because it is a precious treasure for its owner.

The interesting thing about shepherds is that they have a unique way of calling their flock. Amazingly, the sheep knew and understood these voices.[16] The shepherds in Palestine at that time named their sheep according to their characteristics. For example: long nose, black ears, big eyes, etc. A good shepherd knows these differences. In contrast, in the eyes of an untrained shepherd (not having a keen eye) all sheep are the same.

The meaning of a shepherd then expanded beyond just herding sheep. After 3000 BC, leaders in the Mesopotamian region were called "shepherds of their people". One evidence of this is the symbol of the Egyptian monarchy which was the shepherd's staff used by the Pharaoh. In addition, the prophets of Israel also used comparisons to shepherds to remind kings, priests and princes of their duties. This is in line with the writings in the Old Testament.[17]

In the Old Testament, the image of a shepherd and his sheep is widely used to describe the leadership of God's people and God's own relationship with them. The characters in the Old Testament world are described as nomadic people and their leaders are described as shepherds, for example: Abel, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and also Judah.

Apart from being used to refer to the leaders of the Israelites, in the Old Testament, “shepherd” is also used as a title for God Himself. God is the shepherd who leads, guides, loves, nurtures, and protects His sheep. One famous passage is Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd!" This shows how the role of shepherds were very important in the Old Testament world. There is no other figure or thing that can compare to the figure of the shepherd and his sheep.[18]

The use of the shepherd figure does not stop in the Old Testament, but continues in the New Testament. The New Testament uses parallel meanings to those in the Old Testament. In the Gospel of Mark, the word shepherd appears twice. Meanwhile in the other Gospels, the use of the words flock, shepherd, and related things appear sporadically.[19] Not only in the Gospels, in the writings of Paul and the

[16] Lawrence B. Porter, “An Ancient Image of the Church and a Contemporary Challenge,” *Gregorianum* (2001): 58-59.
[17] Wright, “The Good Shepherd,” 44.
[18] Porter, “An Ancient Image,” 60-61.
[19] Porter, “An Ancient Image,” 64-65.

rest of the New Testament, the terms shepherd and flock are also frequently used. Examples are in Acts 20:28-29 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. In both passages, it is shown how the shepherd is seen as a figure who looks after the flock, or in pastoral terms, as a pastoral ministry.[20]

In the Gospels, we find many things related to shepherds and sheep. For Jesus' disciples, the title of shepherd symbolized His redemptive capacity. This is in line with what Jesus said in the Gospel of John 10:11, that Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd, who "lays down his life for his sheep." This passage in the Gospel of John is the most famous passage in describing the figure of the Good Shepherd. The definition of "good" here does not primarily describe a person who has a good outward appearance, but refers to "good" from within. He has a great character, is full of kindness, can sympathize, and there is generosity in him. This good shepherd is contrasted with thieves and robbers (verse 10). Thieves/robbers are evil people with evil/destructive intentions.

"Good Shepherd" in the Context of Indonesian Readers

This section will look at the lexical and contextual understanding of the word "shepherd" ("*gembala*") in Indonesia.

According to *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI), "*gembala*" means "*penjaga atau pemiara binatang* (*ternak*)*, pengangon, tukang angon*"[21] or "guardian, keeper of animals (livestock)". According to the type of animals taken care of, shepherds can be called cattle herders, sheep herders, and others. Interestingly, in the KBBI, "*gembala*" is also defined as "guardian of the safety of many people." This second meaning is closely related to the term "*gembala*" which is used to refer to leaders in the Church (e.g. shepherd of the people, shepherd of the congregation).

In Indonesia, there are people who work as shepherds of ducks. In the past, in Java, duck herders were called "*sontoloyo*". They wear a caping hat with a centerline of 100-120 cm made of coconut leaves, wooden/bamboo slats 140-160 cm long. As a means of entertainment when herding ducks, they carry flutes and or gendiran to hum and chant.[22] The *sontoloyo* profession is often associated with the expression "*sontoloyo angon bebek ilang loro*". This describes the results of one's work that falls

[20] Porter, "An Ancient Image," 67.

[21] KBBI Daring, https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/gembala (Desember, 24th 2023)

[22] Warsito, "Sontoloyo," rubrik Surat Pembaca, *Kompas,* https://www.kompas.id/baca/opini/2018/11/07/surat-kepada-redaksi-137-2 (Desember, 24th 2023)

short of what should be expected-probably due to lack of productivity, negligence, or irregularities. Therefore, the word "*sontoloyo*" is also commonly used as a swear word.

The majority of Indonesia's population is Muslim. The familiar "gembala" in the Islamic mind is "goat herder." It is associated with the profession that the Prophet Muhammad himself once engaged in.[23] In one of his traditions, the Prophet once said, "I used to shepherd the goats of the people of Mecca in exchange for a few qiraths." (Bukhari No. 2262).

There is a popular children's song called, "*Aku adalah Anak Gembala*" ("I am a Shepherd Boy") sung by child artist, Tasya Kamila. The verse is as follows: *Aku adalah anak gembala / Selalu riang serta gembira / Karena aku senang bekerja / Tak pernah malas ataupun lengah / Tralala la la la la* (2x) // *Setiap hariku bawa ternak / Ke padang rumput, dikaki bukit / Rumputnya hijau, subur dan banyak / Ternakku makan tak pernah s'dikit / Tralala la la la la* (2x)

In English, these lyrics can be translated as followsI am a shepherd boy / Always cheerful and happy / Because I love to work / Never lazy or careless / Tralala la la la la (2x) // Every day I take the cattle / To the meadow, at the foot of the hill / The grass is green, lush and plentiful / My cattle eat never s'dikit / Tralala la la la la (2x)

Apparently, there was once also a famous public-figure who was a goat herder. He is Eko Yuli Irawan, a weightlifter who made the nation proud through bronze medal contributions at the 2008 Beijing and 2012 London Olympics, as well as silver at the 2016 Rio de Janeiro and 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The athlete born on July 24, 1989 came from a poor family. His father works as a pedicab driver, while his mother is a vegetable trader in Lampung. Eko himself works herding four goats owned by other people. "If I lose a goat, I have to pay for it. We have to be careful in our work," says Eko.[24]

In Indonesia, there is also the term "breeder", a person whose occupation is raising livestock. While a breeder may also be a shepherd, the two occupations are different. In the KBBI, the word "livestock" is defined as "animals kept (oxen, horses, goats, etc.) for breeding with the purpose of production."[25] So the difference is in the

[23] Muchotob Hamzah, https://suaranahdliyin.com/nabi-dan-filosofi-gembala-25407 (Desember, 24th 2023)

[24] Hasyim, ed., "Si Penggembala Kambing Dulang Medali," *Serambinews.com* https://aceh.tribunnews.com/2021/07/26/si-penggembala-kambing-dulang-medali (Desember, 24th 2023)

[25] KBBI Daring, https://kbbi.kemdikbud.go.id/entri/ternak (Desember, 24th 2023)

"purpose" of raising the animals. The treatment of the animals is also different. Farm animals are mostly kept in massive numbers, treated in a centralized manner, tied up, and confined in cages.

Being production-oriented, it would be natural for a farmer to buy and sell his animals. There is a profit and loss calculation. The farmer can provide the best care for his animals, in order to increase the selling price of the animal. Meanwhile, a shepherd does not think about profit. In fact, there can be an "affective relationship" between the shepherd and the animals. For example, they may not have the heart to slaughter them.

Meaning for Indonesian Readers in 2024

As the last stage of Mburu's inculturation model, this section will look for the "seat of the chair", that is, how the contexts that have been combined in the interpretation become sound in the context of the reader's daily life.

From the OT, NT and Indonesian contexts, there are similarities in the personal qualities of a good shepherd. So, a good shepherd is someone who is reliable, diligent and brave. They even risk their lives to protect their flock. As such, a shepherd is a "savior". The lives of sheep are never free from threatening circumstances. It is not uncommon for shepherds to also have to rescue sheep who, due to their stupidity, are lost/escaped from the flock.

From these qualities, it appears that the center of the shepherds' lives is in the survival of the flocks they care for. Shepherds are not first of all merchants, like farmers. Nor are they selfish thieves.

Another intersection of the OT, NT and Indonesian contexts is the use of a good shepherd as a "metaphor" for a good leader. Today, Church leaders or Christians who hold leadership positions are often referred to as "shepherds", just as in ancient Israel the prophets and great figures were called "shepherds". The Apostle Peter exhorted Church leaders, "Feed the flock of God which is yours, not by force, but willingly according to the will of God, and not for gain, but with devotion." (1 Peter 5:2)

Jesus is the good shepherd of mankind. His kindness and care are not only evident when things are going well (green pastures, still waters, clear guidance), but also when we are "walking in the valley of the shadow of death" (i.e. there is danger, there is an enemy).

The Indonesian people will face the 2024 General Election, electing a President-Vice President and representatives in the legislature. Presumably, the biblical figure

of the "good shepherd" can be one of the benchmarks for the people (especially those who know the Scriptures) in considering the figure to be elected. In short, whether the President and his deputy, as well as the representatives of the people may be the "good shepherd" for hundreds of millions of Indonesians.

If you want to scrutinize further, you can formulate questions, for example: Have the track records of the candidates proven that they have the capacity to be good shepherds-who focus their lives on the well-being of the people, dare to sacrifice themselves for the people, know the peculiarities and needs of the people, do not have the mentality of breeders or thieves, are able to walk in the valley of darkness with the people (not cowardly), and green pastures to aim for? If the elected leader has the qualities of a good shepherd, the future of Indonesia will most likely be fine.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the general concept of inculturation (its meaning and history) and examples of biblical inculturation with contextual hermeneutics by African exegetes. Modeled on the Mburu ("four-legged stool") method of inculturation, the practice of biblical inculturation focusing on the phrase "good shepherd" has been presented.

When examined from the theological, literary, and historical contexts developed in the Old and New Testaments, it was found that "good shepherd" is used literarily and metaphorically for several important figures, even as a title for God himself. All three contexts show the qualities of the good shepherd. When examined from the Indonesian context, more or less similar meanings are found.

As a "four-legged stool" or contextualization effort for Indonesian readers in 2024, the qualities of the good shepherd can be applied to become a standard in considering candidates for President, Vice President, DPR, DPRD, governor who compete in the 2024 elections.

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