

The Church's Approach to the Dayak Meratus Tribe's Culture to Avoid Syncretism

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Abstract:

Evangelising ethnic groups that have long lived within traditional belief systems requires a contextual approach that is aligned with the culture and values of the communities receiving the Gospel. However, the church often faces challenges in preserving the purity of Christian doctrine when new believers remain strongly connected to ancestral traditions. This phenomenon is also evident among Dayak Meratus Christians in Loksado Village. This study aims to provide a conceptual framework for churches in Loksado and other regions with strong ancestral traditions to develop contextual approaches that help believers avoid syncretism without ignoring valuable cultural heritage. Using a qualitative approach through literature-based research, this study identifies a risk of syncretistic tendencies during the process of embracing Christianity among communities previously shaped by traditional belief systems, which may weaken doctrinal purity and spiritual growth. Therefore, the church must place God and His Word above all human cultural expressions and take concrete measures through contextual biblical teaching, exemplary leadership, holistic pastoral care, and continuous discipleship.

Keywords:

Meratus Dayak, tribe, contextual, syncretism

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INTRODUCTION

The process of evangelism among tribes that have long lived with traditional beliefs and hereditary customary rituals needs to be carried out contextually, in harmony with the socio-cultural setting and the values upheld by the community. Darmaputera states that functional theology is contextual theology. Theology that is detached from its context becomes difficult to understand and difficult to apply in everyday life. (Darmaputera, 2004). Therefore, for the truth of the Gospel to be received and understood comprehensively, a process of contextualization that takes into account the socio-cultural background and the values of the receiving community is essential.

In practice, contextual theology sometimes encounters several challenges, one of which is syncretism, namely the blending of Christian teachings with elements of local beliefs, especially within tribal cultures that possess strong spiritual traditions. Kasedu argues that every mission inevitably undergoes a syncretic process, or it can be stated that the development of a mission is difficult to achieve without passing through syncretism. The Gospel can interact and enter into dialogue within a community's culture after undergoing a stage of assimilation with local cultural elements. (Kasedu, 2023). The church needs to respond to this condition so that Christian values remain pure and are able to lead congregations originating from such tribes toward maturity of faith. Within this framework, the Dayak Meratus context becomes relevant for examination. The strength of religious traditions, agricultural rites, and relationships with ancestors documented in the literature indicates the potential for tension when the Gospel is presented contextually. Therefore, a deep understanding is needed of how the church can appropriately position the Gospel so that the process of contextualization aligns with biblical truth and avoids syncretism.

The Dayak Meratus tribe, who inhabit the inland regions of South Kalimantan, is one of the tribes that maintains strong ancestral traditions and beliefs. Firm belief in ancestral spirits, a close relationship with nature, and sacred customary rituals have shaped the cultural identity of the Dayak Meratus people for centuries. According to Surono, among the many traditional villages in South Kalimantan, Loksado is an ideal location to witness and directly experience the richness of the local culture of the indigenous Kalimantan people. They remain faithful in preserving and maintaining their ancestral cultural heritage and customary rituals. (Surono, 2014). Loksado Village is part of Loksado District, one of the districts inhabited by the Dayak Meratus community.

Several studies have discussed the strong influence of Dayak Meratus beliefs on their culture and daily life. Rachmayani notes that aspects of Dayak Meratus belief are reflected in their daily activities, such as farming, selecting land, harvesting, and providing treatment for the sick. In these activities, they seek help from ancestral spirits through prayers and praises, and they also offer offerings as a form of respect. (Rachmayani, 2022).

Sakinah explains that *manugal* is a local tradition of the Dayak Meratus in cultivating dry land. This process consists of several stages, beginning with *batunung*, determining the land, followed by *manabas*, clearing the land of trees, *menyelukut*, and then *manugal*, planting seeds in a traditional manner. After the seeds are planted, the Basambu ceremony is held to ask for crop fertility. The *Aruh Bawanang* and *Aruh Ganal* ceremonies are conducted during the

harvest. All of these processes are rich with rituals, prayers, mantras, and offerings led by customary leaders (Sakinah & Surtikanti, 2024). Aden, in his research, states that the Kaharingan Dayak Meratus community in Loksado represents friendly and open hospitality, which aligns with Christian teachings on divine hospitality. This attitude emerged from a history of inter-subtribal conflict that ended in a peace agreement and formed an identity of plurality in language, culture, and belief (Aden, 2019).

The strong traditional culture of the Dayak Meratus tribe, along with their firm adherence to ancestral rituals, is highly prone to influencing Christian values within the churches where they worship. Soehadha notes that Loksado Village has two churches, namely the GKE (*Gereja Kalimantan Evangelis*) Church and the GBI (*Gereja Bethel Indonesia*) Church. (Soehadha, 2018), which is consistent with data from the Loksado Village Government that also records the presence of two churches in the area (Pemerintah Desa Loksado, 2023). This study aims to identify church strategies in Loksado Village to prevent syncretism between Christian values and the traditional beliefs of the Dayak Meratus community without disregarding their cultural richness. This study is preventive in nature, highlighting several risk factors such as strong attachment to ancestral rituals and an understanding of faith that remains intertwined with elements of customary belief. By recognising these potentials, the church can prepare a contextual approach that safeguards the purity of faith while strengthening Christian identity within the local culture.

This research is important because syncretism within the church has the potential to hinder the growth of congregational faith, making it difficult for believers to become witnesses and role models for the surrounding community who have not yet known Christ. On the other hand, without an appropriate approach, efforts to maintain the purity of faith risk generating a comprehensive rejection of local culture, which could instead create distance between the church and the community. According to Setiawan, proper contextualization enables the church to bridge the Gospel and culture without losing fidelity to biblical truth. (Setiawan, 2020).

In this regard, the present study offers novelty through its effort to formulate a contextual approach that balances theological and anthropological analysis of the Dayak Meratus community. This aligns with Bevans' view that contextual theology is not merely the translation of faith teachings into particular cultural forms, but rather a living dialogical process between the Gospel, church tradition, and social realities and human experiences within a given context. (Bevans, 2011). Thus, this study extends the perspective of previous research, which has generally focused on cultural or theological aspects separately, by offering a more integrative perspective for churches in developing contextual ministry that respects tradition while remaining rooted in a pure Christian faith.

The author hopes that the findings of this study can contribute as a reference for local churches, particularly in inland areas such as Loksado Village, in designing patterns of faith formation that are relevant and contextual for their congregations. It is expected that the results of this study will serve as a foundation for further research that supports evangelism and the development of Christianity amid the diversity of Indonesia's ethnic groups, which display a wide range of rich cultural heritage.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a literature review method. This approach was chosen to enable the author to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural context and religious dynamics of the Dayak Meratus community through available scholarly sources. This method also aligns with the preventive aim of the study, which is to examine the potential for syncretism theologically based on relevant literature. Various research findings, ethnographic reports, and academic publications on the Dayak Meratus and their encounter with Christianity form the basis for constructing the conceptual framework of this study.

The research was conducted through several stages. First, the author identified the research problem and determined the focus of the study based on the literature discussing the culture, beliefs, and religious practices of the Dayak Meratus community. Second, the author collected literature data from books, theological and anthropological journals, and other credible academic sources as the conceptual foundation of the study. (Zed, 2008). The data collection process followed qualitative research principles that emphasise an in-depth understanding through the review of relevant literature (Creswell, 2013).

Third, the data were analysed using a content analysis approach following Krippendorff's model and thematic analysis to identify patterns of thought, cultural values, and theological implications emerging from the literature. Krippendorff's content analysis model was employed to systematically examine texts by establishing units of meaning, assigning thematic codes, and grouping relevant categories. (Krippendorff, 2018). This process helped the author understand the relationship between Dayak Meratus cultural elements and Christian teachings, as well as to examine the dynamics of their encounter as reflected in the reviewed literature.

The final stage involved synthesising the results of the analysis to formulate contextual strategies for the church in anticipating potential syncretism without disregarding the local wisdom of the Dayak Meratus community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dayak Meratus Tribe and Its Culture

The Dayak people are the indigenous inhabitants of Kalimantan who reside in inland regions and consist of various subtribes, including Ngaju, Oot Danum, Meratus, and other subgroups, each with distinctive languages and customs. Historically, the Dayak were nomadic communities, as their livelihoods depended heavily on nature. They adhere to animism and dynamism. The Dayak believe in the presence of spirits in various places and offer respect through offerings to avoid misfortune. They also believe that spirits can control natural elements such as rain, wind, water, and fire. In addition, they believe that certain objects possess spirits, so permission must be sought before using them. (Adinuhgra, 2022).

The Dayak Meratus tribe is a general designation for several Dayak groups inhabiting South Kalimantan. They are spread across various areas, including narrow valleys, hills, riverbanks, and protected forest areas located in the Meratus Mountains. In historical records and previous writings, this tribe is often referred to as *Dayak Bukit*. (Pratama & Nurcahyo, 2019).

An understanding of Dayak Meratus culture needs to begin with an explanation of the meaning of culture itself. According to Tomatala, culture encompasses everything that humans think, strive for, and do comprehensively within the context of their lives to meet various needs. (Tomatala, 2018). Humans and culture are closely interconnected and cannot be separated, because fundamentally, everything humans do is an expression of their culture.

The Dayak Meratus community practices a lifestyle that emphasises family values and the spirit of cooperation. This is reflected in the culture of *handep hapakat*, which is carried out through reciprocal assistance in the process of planting rice, followed by communal meals at the landowner's house. (Sidauruk, 2022). This practice is carried out in turns, making the work feel lighter.

In his research, Aden concludes that the Dayak Meratus community that still adheres to *Kaharingan* demonstrates an open attitude toward followers of other religions. They view every human being as part of one family, based on the belief that all people are created by the same Creator. This openness and sense of togetherness are reflected in social relationships described as *badingsanak* (all are siblings), as well as in the performance of religious rituals and *Aruh Panen*. (Aden, 2019).

The original belief of the Dayak Meratus tribe is *Kaharingan*, which affirms the role of ancestral spirits and other spirits in the universe in determining human life. Hartatik explains that the Dayak Meratus community recognises three creation myths: the creation of the universe, the origin of the first humans, and the beginning of rice on earth. These three myths form the foundation of their beliefs and are reflected in various customary rituals related to shifting cultivation traditions, such as *Aruh Panen*, *Aruh Bawanang*, and others. (Hartatik, 2017).

The Meratus community lives by relying on the surrounding natural resources. Hadi explains that their belief system is rooted in a lifestyle centred on shifting cultivation, with rice as the main crop. Major celebrations within their belief system are generally closely related to the agricultural cycle. Daily activities and rituals reflect their lived experience of agricultural life. (Hadi & Suwarjiya, 2019).

The stages of shifting cultivation can be described as follows. First, *batunung* refers to the process of selecting land for cultivation, followed by *menabas* and *menyelukut*, which involve clearing forest areas to prepare agricultural land. Once the land is ready, the process continues with *manugal*, a traditional farming method that constitutes a core tradition of the community. The subsequent stages include harvesting and *aruh* (harvest festivals). All these stages have distinctive characteristics in each area, but in principle, they involve seeking permission as an expression of respect and reverence toward the rulers of nature and the spirits believed to inhabit the forest. (Gumelar, 2024). They believe that performing ritual ceremonies will bring smoothness and success to their endeavours. Conversely, neglecting these rituals or violating customary rules is believed to bring failure and even disaster. (Soehadha, 2018).

In the traditions of the Dayak Loksado community, *Aruh* (ritual ceremonies) constitutes an important practice, one of which is *Aruh Bawanang*, which must be performed before consuming the newly harvested rice. If this ritual has not yet been carried out, they will cook rice from the previous harvest to meet daily needs. Consuming new rice before the *Aruh* is

considered taboo, because the harvested rice is believed not to fully belong to humans yet. The Dayak community believes that the harvest is not solely their right, but must also be shared with other entities in nature. Therefore, before rice can be used, a *Babari* (distribution) procession must be conducted within the *Aruh* ritual, namely the ritual of sharing the harvest as a form of respect for other beings who are also believed to have rights to the produce of the earth (Soehadha, 2018).

Jeferson explains that the Dayak Meratus people adhere to *pamali* rules, which are believed to cause misfortune or *garing* (illness), and even death to individuals or their families if rituals are violated, whether intentionally or unintentionally. One such violation includes consuming harvested rice that has not yet been ritually consecrated. (Jeferson, 2022). *Pamali* functions as a moral and social guideline to maintain balance in their lives.

Arifin notes that *belian* is a form of traditional healing passed down through generations and is believed to be effective in curing illnesses. This ritual is performed by a *Mamang* throughout the night, using mantras, offerings, distinctive ritual equipment, dances, and chants believed to expel disease from the patient's body. However, with the development of modern times, belief in traditional healing has increasingly diminished, especially among younger generations. Today, when someone is ill, they tend to seek medical assistance. (Arifin & Ramadania, 2019).

The Dayak Meratus community also has a tradition of dance as part of their culture. The *Giring-Giring* dance originates from Loksado and represents Dayak Meratus culture. This dance serves as an expression of gratitude to the ancestors for the successful harvest they have obtained. (Hidayati, 2021). There is also the *manugal* dance, whose movements reflect the stages of the *manugal* agricultural process practised by the Loksado community. These movements include clearing the fields (*manabas*), cleaning burned branches (*mamanduk*), making holes in the soil (*ma'asak*), inserting rice seeds into planting holes (*ma'umang*), and so forth. (Hidayati, 2021). Additionally, there is the *Babangsai* dance, which forms part of the ritual within the *Aruh* ceremony. This dance is performed at the beginning of the harvest ritual as a welcoming gesture for ancestral spirits, as well as an expression of joy among the Loksado people over the presence of the spirits of *Datu Nini* (ancestors), who are believed to attend the *Aruh Panen* ritual. (Rahmani & Dana, 2017).

The culture of the Dayak Meratus community is closely intertwined with their daily life activities. From the description above, it is evident that the most prominent cultural element is the strong dimension of religious ritual, deeply embedded in spiritual traditions that continue to be transmitted from generation to generation.

Profile of Loksado Village, Loksado District

This discussion focuses on Loksado Village because this village has a relatively large Christian population compared to other villages, where Christians remain a minority.

There are eleven villages within Loksado District, one of which is Loksado Village, which serves as the administrative centre of Loksado District. (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Geographically, Loksado Village borders Haratai Village to the east, Hulu Banyu Village to the west, Loklahung to the south, and Muara Ulang Village to the north. (Aden, 2019).

The total area of Loksado Village is 2,160 hectares, consisting of 350 hectares of residential land and yards, 350 hectares of plantations, 12 hectares of public facilities, and 1,448 hectares of forest. (Pemerintah Desa Loksado, 2024).

In 2023, the religious composition of the population in Loksado District consisted of 62% Muslims, 20% adherents of *Kaharingan*, 13% Christians, 4% Hindus, with the remainder being Catholics and Buddhists. (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2024). Specifically in Loksado Village, the population totals 1,020 people, with the following religious composition: 47.5% Christians; 44.8% Muslims; 7.5% adherents of belief in *Tuhan Yang Maha Esa*; and 0.2% Catholics. The primary livelihood of Loksado Village residents is farming. (Pemerintah Desa Loksado, 2024).

The history of Loksado Village is closely related to the formation of Loksado District, which was previously part of Padang Batung District. The name Loksado itself is derived from the name of a small river flowing through the area, namely the Loksado River. Loksado was officially designated as the village name in 1980, following the initiative of missionaries who arrived through the Indonesian Christian Service Institution (*Lembaga Pelayanan Kristen Indonesia*, LEPKI). Loksado Village has two churches. (Pemerintah Desa Loksado, 2023).

Syncretism

Definition

Etymologically, syncretism is derived from the Greek term *synkretismos*, which means to unite, connect, or combine. In other languages, such as English (syncretism) and Italian (*sinkretismo*), the term retains a similar meaning, namely fusion, integration, or mixture. (Marinsah & Ramli, 2017). According to the dictionary, syncretism is defined as a new understanding or teaching formed through the combination of several perspectives to achieve harmony and balance. (Tim Penyusun Pusat Pembinaan dan Pengembangan Bahasa, 1989).

Several scholars have offered definitions of syncretism. MacDonald describes syncretism as a process of unifying various patterns or systems of religious belief, which can ultimately weaken the purity of Christian faith witness. (MacDonald, 2022). Sanou, through a review of various mission literature, explains that religious syncretism is generally understood as a process of mixing diverse forms of belief and religious practice, even those that are mutually contradictory. He further cites Van Rheenen, noting that this phenomenon becomes evident when Christian teachings and practices are adjusted to certain cultural elements, resulting in blurred boundaries of faith. In a similar vein, Moreau views syncretism as a condition in which the core truth of the Gospel experiences a reduction in meaning due to the incorporation of non-Christian elements into church life. (Sanou, 2013). Syncretism can thus be understood as a blending of various belief systems and religious practices that occurs in the effort to adapt to the social and cultural context of a community.

From a theological perspective, Talan explains that syncretism is a process of assimilating one belief into another, resulting in a change in the identity of the original belief. (Talan, 2020). In this process, elements from different teachings intermingle, potentially obscuring core values of belief and affecting the purity of religious doctrine.

Potential for Syncretism within the Church

Various studies indicate that the encounter between the Christian faith and Dayak Meratus culture contains the potential for syncretism, which needs to be anticipated through an appropriate contextual approach so that the Gospel can be understood in its purity without negating local cultural values. This section outlines such potential by examining the historical, social, and theological factors that form the background of the interaction between Christianity and the traditional beliefs of the Dayak Meratus community.

Evangelistic mission is carried out by bringing the Gospel message to tribes that have not yet known Christ. These communities already possess cultural values, customs, and indigenous beliefs that have been transmitted from generation to generation. In order for the Gospel to be understood by its recipients, it is communicated through a process of contextualization that corresponds to the social and cultural conditions, circumstances, and experiences of the community. According to Cahyadi, the Gospel cannot easily or directly transform an existing culture, and as a result, an assimilation between the two often occurs. (Cahyadi, 2010). The recipients of the Gospel may become adherents of Christianity, yet the indigenous culture embedded in their lives continues to shape their Christian values.

Christianity began to enter the Loksado area in 1967 through the ministry of *Gereja Kalimantan Evangelis* (GKE), coinciding with the early period of political restructuring during the *Orde Baru* period. The presence of the church in this region was inseparable from the political situation at the time. Following the events of the *Gerakan 30 September* in 1965, religious affiliation became a sensitive issue within Indonesia's political dynamics. Communities that did not adhere to a religion officially recognised by the government were at risk of being suspected as communists, which could lead to serious consequences such as detention or even death. Consequently, it was not uncommon for a large wave of religious conversions to occur during this period, as people sought affiliation with officially recognised religions. (Mujiburrahman, Alfisyah, 2011). Under these political circumstances, adherents of *Kaharingan* were compelled to choose a formal religion, and some opted to embrace Christianity while carrying with them the culture and worldview that had been inherited across generations.

The Dayak Meratus community that has embraced Christianity faces challenges in avoiding the process of syncretism. According to Tulus, this community generally worships within GKE, which is the oldest Protestant church in Kalimantan. GKE congregations tend to demonstrate a relatively open attitude toward local culture, even though such culture is deeply intertwined with and inseparable from the original belief system of the Dayak people, namely *Kaharingan*. Some church members continue to participate in certain customary rituals of the Dayak Meratus community. Indigenous cultural values and elements remain reflected in their social lives as well as in their church activities. (Tulus, 2019). Long-standing prohibitions (*pamali*) that have been upheld across generations cannot simply be abandoned, even after a change in religious affiliation. Under these conditions, the potential for syncretism should not be understood as an accusation against congregational practices, but rather as a form of theological vigilance, enabling the church to guide believers toward a purer understanding of faith and continued growth in Christ.

The Impact of Syncretism within the Church

The Bible firmly opposes the practice of syncretism, as evidenced in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. The prophets during the Old Testament period struggled against syncretistic practices carried out by the people of Israel through the adoption of beliefs from other nations in whose lands they lived. (Dhandi, 2020). Likewise, in the New Testament era, the apostles confronted teachings such as Gnosticism, Hellenism, and legalistic Judaism. God is supreme over all things, incomparable, and nothing can be equated with Him (Isa. 40:26; Isa. 46:5). The primacy and oneness of God are affirmed in the first commandment of the Decalogue, which declares that only God alone is worthy of worship and that no other entity may be worshipped (Exod. 20:3).

Certain forms of syncretism may produce positive effects within church life. (Talan, 2019), such as the use of local languages in worship, the wearing of traditional attire during church events, and the incorporation of traditional musical elements, which can make Christianity more readily accepted and understood by local communities. On the other hand, many forms of syncretism generate negative impacts on congregations, including the veneration of particular symbols, the worship of ancestral spirits, and the observance of prohibitions that lack biblical grounding. Therefore, the following discussion focuses solely on the negative impacts arising from syncretistic practices within the church.

One negative impact of syncretism is the erosion of the absolute truth found in Jesus Christ. This occurs due to the presence of dualism in the beliefs held by congregants. The essence of such dualism lies in forms of worship that incline toward polytheism, which is incompatible with the Christian faith. (Talan, 2019). As discussed earlier, the affirmation of God's supremacy and oneness in the first commandment of the Decalogue is further emphasised in the New Testament. Jesus' primary commandment in the Gospel of Matthew 22:37-38 calls all people to love God wholly and completely, leaving no space for any other figures or other deities.

Syncretism also causes the Bible, as the Word of God, to no longer function as the sole source of truth. Guidance may instead be sought through dreams, advice from customary leaders, or messages believed to come from ancestral spirits mediated by traditional spiritual practitioners. (Tulus, 2019). The Apostle Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:16, states that Scripture serves to teach, to correct what is wrong, to shape human conduct, and to guide people onto the right path. There is nothing else that can be relied upon to lead humanity to salvation. Only through the help of the Holy Spirit from the Father are human beings able to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and to understand Scripture.

Another negative impact resulting from syncretistic practices is the hindrance of congregational spiritual growth. When syncretistic teachings exert a stronger influence than the Gospel, Christian faith deviates from its true essence. This condition requires serious attention from church leaders, as congregations may be drawn into understandings that fall outside the truth. (Talan, 2019). Without abiding in the true vine, who is the Truth, faith cannot grow or bear fruit (John 15:4-5). Congregations that do not experience spiritual growth will be unable to serve as witnesses or role models for communities that have not yet known Christ. Moreover, their presence may instead become an obstacle for others in understanding and receiving Christ.

The Role of the Church for the Congregation

The church can also be understood as a community of believers bound together in love, with a shared commitment to gather faithfully with one heart and to build fellowship within it. (Darmawan et al., 2021). The example of the early church in Acts 2:42-43 shows that they gathered and devoted themselves to fellowship, diligently listening to the apostles' teaching and proclamation of the Word, praying, giving offerings, and breaking bread together in the bond of brotherly love.

According to Zalukhu, the task of the church is to guide and equip the congregation in their journey toward maturity of faith and conformity to Christ. The church bears responsibility for preparing its members to carry out the tasks entrusted to them responsibly. In addition, the church plays a role in shaping strong mental and spiritual foundations, enabling believers to face various challenges in personal life, family, and church, and to become a blessing to society wherever they are (Zalukhu & Zalukhu, 2022).

Evangelism is the process of proclaiming the Gospel to those who do not yet believe. When a person decides to become a follower of Christ, the church functions as a place and community responsible for helping that person grow in faith, know God and His Word more deeply, and participate in winning others for the glory of Christ. (Sondopen, 2019). Spiritual growth for every follower of Christ is a lifelong and continuous process. The Apostle Paul writes that everyone who has received Christ must continue to abide in Him, being rooted and built up in Him, so as to be strengthened in faith (Col. 2:6-7).

Contextual Theology as the Basis for the Church's Attitude toward Culture

When the Gospel is proclaimed to tribes with strong cultures and traditions, the blending of values between the two is very likely to occur, because human beings cannot be separated from their culture. Kobong states that the encounter between the Gospel and culture has long been an enduring topic within the struggle of Christian faith. From the beginning, the Gospel cannot be separated from culture, because it is always present in all aspects of human life. (Kobong, 2008).

The church must respond to this reality firmly by placing God and the Bible, as the Word of God, above human culture, because God is the Creator of humanity and the universe. Yet, out of His love for humanity, God revealed Himself through the coming of Christ as a human being within human culture, so that humanity might understand His love.

Tomatala proposes seven criteria as a foundation for legitimate contextualization to avoid syncretism. (Tomatala, 2018):

First, legitimate contextual theology consistently upholds the primacy of the Bible, the Word of God, as the standard of truth for and within all human cultures. Second, it emphasises the supremacy of God as the Ruler and Creator of all things, who cannot be compared with anything He has created. Third, it firmly holds to the truth that Jesus the Saviour is fully God and fully human. Fourth, contextual theology affirms that the Holy Spirit is God, who guides and leads human beings to the knowledge of Christ and empowers them to live holy lives and bear witness to Him. Fifth, it acknowledges human sinfulness and the consequent need for Jesus

as Saviour, based on the grace of God. Sixth, it understands that the church is God's people who have been called out of the world and now belong to Christ as a witness to the world of God's love. Seventh, legitimate contextualization is able to adapt the Gospel into human culture, enter into the human worldview, and bring about transformation in both culture and life.

These seven criteria should be employed by the church in discerning which cultural elements may be adapted within church life and which must first be transformed so that they align with Christian faith values. (Tomatala, 2018). The example of the Apostle Paul, who declared that knowing Christ is of surpassing worth, led him to relinquish all that had previously been a source of pride. For the sake of gaining Christ, the true Truth, everything else became meaningless to him (Phil. 3:7-8). Therefore, all traditions and cultural practices that do not accord with legitimate contextual theology must be abandoned. All elements related to ancestral spirits, powers other than God, and the veneration of objects or particular figures must be relinquished.

At the same time, the church may preserve and develop cultural elements that do not contradict the truth values of the Bible within church life. These include the use of local languages in worship, the use of traditional musical instruments, and the practice of values such as togetherness, family solidarity, love, and openness toward all people, as well as other cultural aspects that are in harmony with the truth of God's Word.

The Church's Efforts to Help the Congregation Avoid Syncretism

This section outlines various church strategies for preventing syncretism as discussed in the literature on practical theology and contextual theology. Warren states that the church is a living organism that grows naturally. Growth does not need to be forced; rather, the key is to remove obstacles that hinder it. No special strategies are required for a healthy church to grow, because growth will occur naturally. (Warren, 2000). Just as a branch can grow and bear fruit only when it abides in the vine (John 15:4), so too the church will grow when it abides in Christ. A church that is rooted in Christ will be able to help the congregation avoid the influence of syncretism and grow toward conformity with Him.

Intensive and Contextual Biblical Teaching

One way for the church to avoid syncretism is by strengthening intensive and contextual biblical teaching. The church needs to ensure that the congregation understands the foundational and essential truths, namely, the Word of God as the highest authority of the Christian faith. Setiawan notes that when the Gospel encounters local culture, the church must employ a contextualization approach that serves as a bridge between the Christian message and local traditions, so that evangelism is not only culturally accepted but remains rooted in biblical truth (Setiawan, 2020). A healthy approach to contextual theology helps the church preserve doctrinal purity without rejecting positive cultural values.

Within the context of the Dayak Meratus community, which highly values togetherness and family solidarity (Sidauruk, 2022), a faith formation model based on small groups with a familial atmosphere can serve as an effective means for contextual learning of faith. Pastoral

literature indicates that interactive settings, the use of local language, and simple approaches can enhance congregational understanding of the Word of God without losing theological depth. Such an approach reflects the principles of the early church, which devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and prayer (Acts 2:42-43), so that the faith of the congregation is built upon the truth of Scripture (John 8:32).

The Exemplary Life of Church Leaders

In addition to strong teaching, the exemplary life of spiritual leaders is a crucial aspect in preventing syncretism. Samarenna states that a leader is not only expected to possess leadership skills, but also to serve as a model through personal life conduct. (Samarenna & Siahaan, 2019). The life transformation of a leader speaks more powerfully than words proclaimed from the pulpit. Such an example becomes a living model for a growing congregation, enabling believers to experience transformation in their own lives. Talan explains that life transformation is a way to break free from syncretism. Genuine transformation involves the renewal of mindset and values rooted in the truth of God's Word, whereby individuals who were previously entangled in syncretism experience holistic change. (Talan, 2019).

Life transformation through the truth of God's Word and the work of the Holy Spirit also brings about cultural transformation, namely, the reshaping of cultural practices that contradict Scripture into practices that glorify God. As stated by Hiebert, the Gospel has the power to renew value systems and cultural practices through the application of biblical teaching rooted in God's truth within the local context. This transformation does not merely affect outward behaviour, but penetrates the human mindset and worldview, so that the entire cultural structure is renewed toward alignment with God's truth. (Hiebert, 2008). In many traditional cultures, religious actions are often motivated by fear of supernatural powers; however, through sound theological understanding, such fear can be transformed into an awareness of God's saving love (John 3:16). This process of renewal is sustained by the example of spiritual leaders who have first experienced life transformation through the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, so that through their lives, genuine faith shapes ways of thinking, acting, and engaging with the surrounding culture.

Holistic Pastoral Care

The church is called to nurture the faith of its members and to guide them toward growth into Christlikeness through accompaniment centred on the Word of God. Hermanto explains that church growth that is in accordance with Scripture is growth grounded in the principles of God's Word. This process includes evangelism that depends on God's power, discipleship, and holistic or comprehensive pastoral care. In its implementation, certain adjustments may be made in response to specific contexts, yet in principle it remains anchored in the same essential foundations. (Hermanto, 2021).

Telaumbanua writes that a pastor is a person chosen by God to guide, educate, and teach the congregation to know God and to practice His Word, so that they may grow to become like Christ (Telaumbanua, 2019). Susanto emphasises that pastoral theology in Indonesia should not merely transmit Western heritage, but must be developed contextually, using approaches that

arise from the lived experiences of congregations and that address life holistically, from individuals to society and the environment. Relevant church ministry does not only emphasise personal understanding of faith, but also the embodiment of faith in communal life and in everyday socio-cultural relationships (Susanto, 2014). Within the context of the Dayak Meratus community, which is characterised by strong social bonds and a spirit of *gotong royong* (cooperation and communal solidarity), the church can embody the love of Christ through ministries that engage the daily lives of congregants. The church needs to develop contextual pastoral ministries through pastoral care, counselling, and household visitation, so that spiritual leaders may know their congregants more personally. Clebsch and Jaekle note that holistic pastoral action encompasses the dimensions of healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling (Clebsch & Jaekle, 1994).

This principle aligns with Nugroho's work, which presents a model of holistic pastoral accompaniment as a form of congregational formation that reaches all dimensions of human life. Such accompaniment not only emphasises spiritual growth, but also relational and social restoration, as well as the well-being of congregants, as concrete expressions of God's love that restores His creation. (Nugroho, 2017). Accordingly, aspects such as improving welfare, providing skills training, offering health education, and accompanying agricultural activities can be understood as concrete expressions of holistic and contextual pastoral care for the Dayak Meratus community.

On this basis, holistic pastoral ministry plays an important role in helping Dayak Meratus congregations live out the Christian faith in its purity amid the richness of their ancestral culture. Through such ministry, the church can prevent the emergence of syncretism and strengthen an identity of faith that is firmly rooted in the truth of God's Word.

Discipleship toward the Multiplication of Souls

Discipleship is a process of spiritual formation carried out intensively through personal relationships between mentors and disciples. Mentors do not merely teach doctrine, but also present a consistent example of life. The goal of discipleship is to form disciples who love God, obey His Word, and grow into Christlikeness, so that they are ultimately able to multiply new disciples. (Tanusaputra et al., 2021). Jesus Himself provided a model of discipleship that was personal in nature, involved daily life, and took place continuously before He delivered the Great Commission.

Within the context of ministry in rural areas such as Loksado, effective discipleship can be pursued by following Jesus' pattern of ministry, which was relational, close, and ongoing. Wau notes that growing disciples are expected to become agents of transformation within the congregation and to reach the surrounding community to know Christ. Continuous discipleship encourages evangelism to take place naturally through the witness of life and acts of love, while at the same time reaffirming the Great Commission to make all nations His disciples. (Wau, 2023).

Based on theoretical studies of discipleship and faith formation, the implementation of effective discipleship in the Dayak Meratus context can be formulated through the following operational elements:

1. Regular small-group meetings in which mentors and disciples engage deeply with God's Word using language and examples closely connected to their cultural experiences;
2. Accompaniment in daily life, including shared prayer, discussions about struggles of faith, and evaluation of practices that may potentially blend with customary beliefs;
3. An emphasis on exemplarity, whereby spiritual leaders demonstrate lives grounded in God's Word and refrain from cultural practices that contradict the Christian faith;
4. Instruction in foundational doctrines, especially concerning the uniqueness of Christ, proper worship, and the dangers of spiritual practices that open space for syncretism;
5. The involvement of disciples in ministry, enabling them to share their faith through concrete acts of love within the community.

These operational principles align with the findings of Zebua and Lugu, who affirm that discipleship grounded in the Great Commission is key to church growth and is essential for maintaining doctrinal purity amid evolving cultural dynamics. (Zebua et al., 2023). By cultivating focused and contextual discipleship, the church is expected to strengthen the firmness of congregational faith and reduce the risk of blending Christian teachings with cultural practices that are not aligned with the truth of God's Word.

CONCLUSION

This study affirms that the encounter between the Gospel and culture requires theological sensitivity so that the message of salvation does not lose its purity. In the context of the Dayak Meratus community, contextual evangelism needs to be realised through a deep understanding of local cultural values and practices, enabling the proclamation of the Gospel to be received without compromising the truth of God's Word. The church is called to place the Word of God as the measure of all cultures and to present ministry that touches all dimensions of congregational life.

With a strong theological foundation and faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel, the church is expected to build a missional life of faith, rooted in the love of Christ and radiating His light within the culture to which it is sent. Such an attitude is necessary not only to nurture the congregation's growth in faith but also as a preventive step so that the church does not become entangled in forms of syncretism that can obscure Christian identity. In this way, the church can respond wisely to local culture, appreciate noble values that align with God's Word, and reject cultural elements that have the potential to lead believers into syncretism.

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