

# FROM EXCLUSIVE TO INCLUSIVE-CULTURAL: DECOLONIZATION OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION TO CULTURE AT HKBP PARSAORAN DAME

Hanna Masta Pasarib<sup>1</sup>, Riris Johanna Siagian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> STT HKBP Pematangsiantar

Email: [Pasaribuhanna9@gmail.com](mailto:Pasaribuhanna9@gmail.com)<sup>1</sup>, [ririsjohannasiagian@stt-hkbp.ac.id](mailto:ririsjohannasiagian@stt-hkbp.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines the dynamics of the church's decolonization of Batak culture in the context of the HKBP Parsaoran Dame congregation, as a theological effort to free itself from the hegemony of Western theology that historically shaped the colonial mission paradigm. To date, the church's mission has often operated within a dualistic framework that separates the Gospel from custom, faith from culture, and the sacred from the profane, thus creating epistemological tension between Christian faith and local cultural identity. Three theoretical frameworks are used: A. Afaradi's decolonial theology on epistemic liberation from Western domination; Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and third space, which explains the process of negotiating the meaning of faith in a cultural context; and Robert Sibarani's idea of Dalihan Na Tolu as a source of Batak ethics and spirituality. HKBP Parsaoran Dame is experiencing a mission paradigm shift toward an inclusive, dialogical, and collaborative approach. This process of integration between faith and culture produces a form of religious hybridity that affirms the rootedness of Christian faith in Batak values without losing its universal dimension. Theologically, mission decolonization is understood not merely as the replacement of Western symbols with local elements, but as an epistemic and spiritual liberation that places local culture as the locus theologicus of the space where God is presented and experienced through the language, symbols, and values of society. This research emphasizes that a decolonized church is a church that is culturally rooted yet remains universal in the love of Christ, and makes the values of marsiadapari (mutual cooperation) and marsilupahon (mutual support) the foundation of contextual, liberating, and transformative mission practice. This paper was developed with a qualitative approach through in-depth interviews and participatory observation, this research combines contextual theology and decolonial theory as the basis for analysis.

**Keywords:** *Decolonization, Mission, Church, HKBP Parsaoran Dame, Batak Culture, inculturation*

## I. Introduction

The process of encounter between Christianity and Batak culture is an important episode in the history of the spread of the Gospel in Indonesia.<sup>1</sup> In the Tapanuli region, the mission brought by the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) from Germany since the mid-19th century not only introduced new teachings about the Christian faith, but also presented a Western civilization project that touched all aspects of the lives of the Batak people.<sup>2</sup> Through education, liturgy, and church governance, the mission forms a new value orientation that has broad implications for local social structures and cultural systems.<sup>3</sup> The church then grew into a dominant social and religious institution, which not only functioned as a place of worship, but also as a center for the formation of identity, morality, and modernity.<sup>4</sup> However, this mission, which brought about profound transformation, was not without consequences. In their efforts to instill Christian values, missionaries often viewed Batak cultural practices, including customs, the

<sup>1</sup> Sita T. van Bemmelen, Christianity, Colonization, and Gender Relations in North Sumatra: A Patrilineal Society in Flux (Leiden: BRILL, 2017), 23.

<sup>2</sup> JC Vergouwen, Toba Batak Society and Customary Law (Yogyakarta: LKiS Pelangi Aksara, 2004), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Albiner Siagian, Melinda Siahaan, and Dian Purba, "Hasortaon: The Interreligious Friendship of Christian Batak," Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research (Paris: Atlantis Press SARL, 2025), 18.

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dalihaan na tolu kinship system, burial rituals, and traditional religious symbols, as forms of “pagan” beliefs that must be abandoned for the sake of purity of faith.<sup>5</sup> This perspective places custom in a subordinate position to religion and is often objectified, creating a dichotomous relationship between the Gospel and custom, faith and tradition, sacred and profane.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Batak culture has not only undergone a process of Christianization but also a colonization of meaning. Therefore, Christian missions often view culture as an object.<sup>7</sup> HKBP (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan), which was born from the womb of the RMG mission, has developed into the largest church institution in the Tapanuli region and even in Indonesia.<sup>8</sup> This institutional success contains a paradox, on the one hand, HKBP has become a symbol of the spiritual and social revival of the Batak people.<sup>9</sup> But on the other hand, it also inherited a theological and epistemological structure oriented towards the colonial paradigm.<sup>10</sup> This paradigm is apparent in the way the church understands customs as partners that must be controlled or traditions that need to be filtered so that they do not conflict with the doctrine of faith.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the relationship between the church and Batak culture has been marked from the beginning by an epistemic tension between a mission that claims universality and customs rooted in locality.

The phenomenon of discrimination against local culture by church missions not only occurs in Tapanuli, but also in various other regions in Indonesia.<sup>12</sup> Nationally, several studies have shown that missionary and church institutions rooted in Western colonialism often display an ambivalent attitude toward local cultures. On the one hand, they recognize certain moral values within local cultures. On the other hand, they continue to position these cultures as inferior to universal Christian values rooted in Europe.<sup>13</sup> Since its initial encounter with Christianity, Batak culture has undergone a reconstruction of meaning. Rituals such as *asmangongkal holi* and the *gotilon* festival, as well as several other cultural traditions. Reconstructed according to Christian values. In local contexts such as the HKBP, these tensions take on more concrete forms.<sup>14</sup> The congregation in this region lives in an environment that strongly maintains Batak customs, including the *dalihaan natolu* system and socio-religious rituals such as *mangongkal holi* (exhumation of ancestral bones) or *ulaon unjuk* (traditional wedding ceremony). However, the church, as the spiritual authority, often limits the scope for customary participation in liturgical life. In their encounter with Injilla, Batak churches such as HKBP do not reject the form and instruments of the *gondang*, but reject its magical meaning.<sup>15</sup> This debate shows that the colonial legacy still haunts the church's mindset, which theologically often regards customs as entities that must be sanctified before being accepted into the worship space.<sup>16</sup>

These phenomena illustrate that the issue of mission and culture is not merely a problem of the past, but remains a contemporary challenge for the Indonesian church. This challenge demands a new paradigm capable of shifting the relationship between church and culture from one of domination and subordination to one of dialogue and partnership. The idea of turning from adversary to partner holds profound theological and epistemological significance. It stems from the realization that for centuries Christian missions in Batak lands (and in various regions of the global south) were carried out within a colonial framework, where the Gospel was brought alongside Western cultural superiority.<sup>17</sup> Decolonization of mission is not simply an effort to replace Western symbols with local ones, but rather a systematic effort to dismantle knowledge structures that position local culture as an object to be changed, rather than as a subject that participates in interpreting faith. Research on the relationship between church mission and Batak culture has been a focus of several previous studies. First, most previous research focuses on the history of missions in Tapanuli in general (e.g., Brill, 2020; Van Bemmelen, 2019). Second, Afaradi (2025) and Dale (2024),

<sup>5</sup> Mauly Purba, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Case of the Gondang Sabangunan in the Order of Discipline of the Toba Batak Protestant Church," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 207.

<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Theology in Context, Thoughts on Contextual Theology in Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: Pt Kanisius, 2000), 164.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Le Grys, "Review of Bosch, Transforming Mission," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 3 (1993): 386.

<sup>9</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Cypri Jehan Paju Dale, "Becoming Stronger: Christianity, Indigenous Politics of Self-Determination, and Endogenous Transformation in West Papua," *Oceania* 94, no. 3 (2024): 165.

<sup>11</sup> Rocky Agusty Vernando Simamora et al., "The Role of HKBP Church in Preserving Batak Cultural Identity among the Young Generation of Batak Christians," *Jurnal Sosial Teknologi* 4, no. 3 (2024): 200.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Theology in the North Atlantic World* (Leiden: BRILL, 2019), 55.

<sup>13</sup> Kirsteen Kim and Andrew Anderson, *Edinburgh 2010: Mission Today and Tomorrow* (Oxford: OCMS, 2011), 87.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak: Values, Traditions, and Religiosity* (Medan: Balai Pustaka, 2018), 76.

<sup>15</sup> Arifin M. Siregar, *Traditional Batak Music and the Dynamics of Christian Faith* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2018), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth A. Meyers, "Missional Church, Missional Liturgy," *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (2010): 44.

<sup>17</sup> Elia Manggang, "Blue Diakonia: The Mission of Indonesian Churches for and with the Sea," *Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2022): 51.

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for example, highlight the importance of a decolonial approach in Asian and Pacific theology but do not present concrete case studies of its application in specific communities. Third, studies on the HKBP tend to highlight internal organizational conflicts, leadership issues, and general theology (Purba, 2005; Brill, 2020), while cultural and customary dimensions are still treated as background rather than primary focus. As a result, the role of customary law in shaping the spirituality and identity of the congregation has not received adequate attention. In contrast to the research above, this study seeks to further explore the postcolonial paradigm in order to decolonize the mission carried out by HKBP Parsaoran Dame. From a decolonial theological perspective, the church is called to undertake epistemic reconstruction, recognizing local experiences, languages, and symbols as locus theologicus, that is, the place where God's revelation can be understood and expressed. Thus, Batak customs are no longer merely "cultural tools" for conveying the Gospel, but an integral part of the theological process itself. This approach shifts the mission orientation from "Christianization of culture" to "inculturation of faith," where faith and culture mutually enrich each other in an equal relationship (Afaradi, 2025).

HKBP Parsaoran Dame serves as a significant case study because it is here that the dynamics of decolonization of mission can be directly observed. Amidst the currents of modernization and the pressures of globalization, local congregations strive to maintain Batak customs and identity without losing their commitment to faith. These efforts are evident in the congregation's initiative to use the Batak language in worship, perform gondang sabangunan music in church celebrations, and hold dialogues between the pastor and the raja parhata to find common ground between church teachings and customary values. This negotiation process demonstrates a paradigm shift from a conversion-oriented mission to a collaboration-oriented mission. Research on the decolonization of the church's mission towards Batak culture at HKBP Parsaoran Dame has broad significance. First, academically, this research expands the study of contextual theology in Indonesia, which has previously focused more on liturgical or social aspects, by incorporating a decolonial dimension as a framework for critical analysis. This research integrates theories of mission theology, anthropology of religion, and postcolonial studies to reread the relationship between church and customary law as a field of knowledge power.

### **Formulation of the problem**

Based on the background that the author has explained above, the problem formulation in this study is, First, how is the decolonization of the mission carried out by HKBP Parsaoran Dame in an effort to preserve culture and customs? Second, what is the relationship between the HKBP Parsaoran Dame church and Batak customs and culture? Third, how is the liturgical practice carried out in the HKBP Parsaoran Dame church in an effort to decolonize the mission?

### **Research purposes**

The objectives of this research, in accordance with the author's research problem formulation, are: first, to explore the decolonization of the mission carried out by the HKBP Parsaoran Dame Church in dealing with Batak culture. Second, to elaborate more deeply on the church relationships that developed during the decolonization of the church's mission. Third, to analyze church practices, specifically the liturgy, in accommodating customs and culture.

### **Benefits of Research**

Theoretically, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of contextual mission theology and the discourse of decolonizing theology in Indonesia. This study emphasizes the importance of rereading the relationship between the Gospel and local culture within a framework that is not hegemonic, but rather dialogical and reconciliatory. By placing the Batak context and the HKBP Parsaoran Dame church as the theological locus, this research contributes to building a new paradigm of mission theology rooted in the social and cultural realities of the Indonesian archipelago. Furthermore, the results of this research can serve as a basis for the development of pastoral and missiological theories that place culture as an epistemic partner in understanding God's work of salvation in the world. Thus, this research not only adds a new dimension to the discourse of contextual theology in Indonesia but also contributes to interdisciplinary studies between theology, anthropology, and the sociology of religion.

Practically, this research has strategic value for churches, religious institutions, and indigenous communities in building relationships that respect and enrich each other. For HKBP and other churches in Indonesia, this research can serve as a critical reflection to review mission and ministry paradigms that tend to ignore local cultural values. By proposing a model of mission as a partnership, this research provides practical direction for churches to develop pastoral approaches that are sensitive to cultural contexts without losing the integrity of their faith. For the Batak community, the results of this research strengthen awareness of the importance of preserving local customs and

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wisdom as an integral part of Christian faith life. The church can act as an agent of cultural reconciliation, rather than as a force that separates communities from their traditional roots.

## Research methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with the paradigms of contextual theology and cultural ethnography. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research aims to deeply understand the dynamics of the relationship between the church's mission and Batak culture, which is complex, contextual, and related to the values, symbols, and meanings that exist within the HKBP Parsaoran Dame community. This approach also allows researchers to explore narratives emerging from the experiences of congregation members, church servants, and traditional leaders as active subjects in the process of mission decolonization.

The data collection technique used by the author is interviews. The interviews used are semi-structured interviews. The interviews focused on perceptions of the relationship between the church and customs, changes in attitudes towards Batak culture, and concrete experiences regarding the integration of customary values in the life of faith. In addition, participant observation, where the researcher was involved in church and customary activities, such as the pamasu-masuon party, martupol (engagement), ulaon saur matua, and HKBP Parsaoran Dame service activities. This observation is important to understand the symbolic interaction that occurs between the liturgical practices of the church and Batak customary expressions.

In this study, the author used thematic analysis and contextual theological reflection. This process begins with data reduction. Data from interviews and observations were selected and categorized based on themes such as colonial missions, encounters between customs and the church, value conflicts, and cultural reconciliation. Second, data presentation. The reduced data were arranged in the form of narrative descriptions and a matrix of the relationship between mission practices and Batak culture. This presentation serves to demonstrate the relationship between church power, customary traditions, and congregational participation. Third, theological interpretation and reflection. At this stage, empirical data were interpreted within the framework of contextual theology and mission decolonization theory.

## Results and Discussion

### Decolonization, Postcolonialism and Culture

The idea of decolonizing the church's mission stems from the realization that Christian theology in Indonesia was not born in a vacuum. It was formed through a long historical process in which Western colonialism inherited knowledge structures, languages, and ways of thinking that positioned local culture as the "object" of proclamation, not the "subject" of faith. In the context of HKBP, this is still evident in the tension between the legacy of the colonial mission and the strong Batak traditional values. To dismantle this oppressive theological structure, this study utilizes three interrelated theoretical frameworks: decolonial theology by A. Afaradi, postcolonial theory by Homi K. Bhabha, and Batak local wisdom by Robert Sibarani. These three form a unified paradigm that views the church's mission as a dynamic dialogue between the Gospel and culture, rather than the domination of one over the other.

According to A. Afaradi, theological decolonization is a process of epistemic liberation, namely an effort to shift the center of theological knowledge from Western hegemony to the faith experience of local communities.<sup>18</sup>Theology that has been rooted in European thought patterns needs to be reconstructed so that it is rooted in southern epistemology—a way of thinking that was born from the struggles of faith, culture, and history of Asian and Pacific societies.<sup>19</sup>Afaradi emphasized that colonialism is not only physical colonization, but also intellectual and spiritual colonization.<sup>20</sup>Through colonial theological education, local communities were taught to understand God through Western language and symbols, thus losing the ability to interpret faith in their own cultural idiom. Therefore, decolonizing theology means dismantling oppressive knowledge structures and returning interpretive authority to local communities. Mission is no longer seen as a process of bringing the Gospel into culture, but rather as a reciprocal dialogue in which Batak culture becomes the locus theologicus, the place where God's revelation is understood and expressed.<sup>21</sup>The church is not called to "change" customs, but to recognize God's presence within them. In this way, Afaradi guides the church beyond theological colonialism to equal participation in God's work of salvation in Batak lands.

<sup>18</sup>A. Afaradi, *Contemporary Decolonial Theology Approach and Its Implications for Mission in Indonesia* (Pretoria: Verbum et Ecclesia, 2025), 4–5.

<sup>19</sup>Afaradi, *Contemporary Decolonial Theology Approach and Its Implications for Mission in Indonesia*, 7.

<sup>20</sup>Afaradi, *Contemporary Decolonial Theology Approach and Its Implications for Mission in Indonesia*, 9.

<sup>21</sup>A. Afaradi, "Decolonial Mission Theology in Southeast Asia," *Asian Journal of Missiology* 15, no. 2 (2024): 115.

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While Afaradi highlights the epistemological aspects of decolonization, Homi K. Bhabha offers a cultural dimension that enriches this analysis. In his landmark work, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduced the concepts of hybridity and third space as areas where meaning and identity are negotiated between two cultural systems.<sup>22</sup> Bhabha rejects the binary view between “colonizer” and “colonized.” In reality, colonial interactions always produce new forms of identity that are neither entirely Western nor entirely local.<sup>23</sup> This process of encounter produces a “third space,” a symbolic arena where new meanings emerge through negotiations between two interacting cultural forces.<sup>24</sup> Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is not a weak compromise, but a creative cultural strategy. It opens up a third space where the Gospel can be lived in local languages and symbols without losing its theological meaning.

Robert Sibarani provides a concrete anthropological basis for understanding Batak culture as a theological source. In his work, *Toba Batak Local Wisdom: Values, Traditions, and Religiosity*, Sibarani asserts that Batak customs are a value system that regulates human relationships with others, nature, and the Creator.<sup>25</sup> The basic principles of *Dalihan Na Tolu*, which consist of *somba marhula-hula* (respecting the wife's family), *manat mardongan tubu* (being careful with blood relatives), and *elek marboru* (being gentle with the wife's family) are the moral foundation that fosters respect, balance and togetherness.<sup>26</sup> These values do not contradict Christian teachings, but can be read as practical manifestations of Christ's love. By positioning tradition as a source of spiritual values, Sibarani paved the way for the church to develop an incarnative theology, a theology rooted in community life. The HKBP Church, which integrates the values of *Dalihan Na Tolu* into its ministry structure, is not “adopting tradition,” but affirming a faith rooted in its own land.

Therefore, the three theories above complement each other in constructing the paradigm of mission decolonization, which the author uses as an analytical tool in the HKBP Parsaoran Dame Church. When these three frameworks are put into dialogue, a collaborative and dialogical mission paradigm is born. Epistemic decolonization (Afaradi) frees theology from Western domination. Cultural decolonization (Bhabha) creates a hybrid space for negotiating the meaning of faith. Practical decolonization (Sibarani) affirms tradition as the church's partner in living out God's love.

### Mission in the Context of the HKBP Parsaoran Dame Congregation

HKBP Parsaoran Dame, located in Parbuluan District, Dairi Regency, is one of the congregations within the HKBP Dairi District ministry structure. This congregation comprises approximately 200 families, the majority of whom are of Toba Batak ethnicity, and still strongly practices traditional values such as *Dalihan Na Tolu*. The traditional social structure here remains functional at every stage of life, from birth to marriage and death to traditional celebrations. The church plays a central role in community life, but its interaction with tradition often creates symbolic and theological tensions.

Since its founding, the HKBP's mission in this region has been oriented towards three main areas, namely, kerygmatic service (*Marturia*) for the proclamation of the Gospel, diaconal service (*Diakonia*) for social and humanitarian matters, and liturgical service (*Koinonia*) for worship and sacraments. However, from field interviews and participant observations, it was found that the implementation of the mission was still often framed within a subtle colonial paradigm, namely a mission that still positions tradition as an element that needs to be adapted to the church, not as an equal partner in the proclamation of the Gospel.

From the results of interviews and observations, three main patterns of mission practice were obtained at HKBP Parsaoran Dame. According to St. S. Pasaribu, the church's mission is understood primarily as *pangalap ni tondi*, a call to bring people to Christ through preaching and worship. “The church must prioritize the proclamation of the Word, not be defeated by tradition.”<sup>27</sup> This view demonstrates that mission theology at the congregational level remains heavily doctrinally and normatively oriented. Custom is positioned as a context, not a theological partner. For example, in Sunday sermons. This approach reproduces the colonial dichotomy between “spiritual faith” and “worldly values,” thus rendering the proclamation of the Gospel irrelevant to the cultural experience of the congregation.

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<sup>22</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 112–113.

<sup>23</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 118.

<sup>24</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft et al. (London: Routledge, 1995), 209.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak: Values, Traditions, and Religiosity* (Medan: Unimed Press, 2017), 43.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak*, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with St. S. Pasaribu, HKBP Parsaoran Dame, June 18, 2025.

On the other hand, in its worship practices, the HKBP Parsaoran Dame church has begun to embrace local cultural elements. For example, during celebrations such as the Gotilon Festival and Christmas, traditional gondang sabangunan music is used to accompany the entrance procession of the parhalado and the congregation. However, its use remains strictly limited. According to Sintua L. Sihombing, "Gondang may be used as long as it is not used in official worship, so that it is not considered 'traditional worship.'"<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates that the church is beginning to create space for customary involvement, a process that is constantly negotiated. The church attempts to embrace local symbols, but remains under careful theological control. Tensions arise during the ulaon saur matua (funeral) ceremony, which has been under the church's control from the outset. This demonstrates a reconstruction of the meaning of Batak culture. The church typically refuses if families wish to use traditional prayers inside the church building. According to RP, this practice, liturgical colonialism, remains evident, as the sacred space of the church is identified with a Western space that is sterile of local cultural expression.<sup>29</sup> However, the younger generation of the church is beginning to demonstrate a new paradigm. According to Mrs. H (a youth activist), we want an open church because, for us, tradition is not an idol, but a way of respecting others.<sup>30</sup> This view is in line with Afaradi's spirit of decolonization, which places culture as the locus theologicus where faith is understood and lived out in a concrete way.

In another context related to social diaconal services, HKBP Parsaoran Dame is also active in social activities such as family economic empowerment, organic farming training, and health service posts. However, this diaconal approach is often programmatic, derived from the HKBP district structure and has not been significantly influenced by local Batak wisdom such as the values of marsiadapari (mutual cooperation) or marsiurupan (mutual support). JS, when there is a traditional celebration, we help each other without being asked. But in the church, assistance is arranged through proposals. This expression illustrates the gap between institutional diaconalism and living indigenous solidarity. The church has not fully integrated indigenous communal ethics into its mission practices. However, according to Robert Sibarani, Dalihan Na Tolu provides a very strong moral foundation for relationship-based ministry and mutual respect.<sup>31</sup>

### **Decolonizing the Theological Mission as Epistemic Liberation**

According to Afaradi, theological decolonization is the process of freeing Christian theology from the Western epistemic hegemony that has dominated the way of thinking and theology in the global south.<sup>32</sup> Historically, Christian missions to the Batak lands were carried out by the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) from Germany in the mid-19th century. This mission brought not only religious teachings but also Western paradigms of knowledge and culture that positioned Batak customs as something that needed to be purified or refined to conform to Christianity.<sup>33</sup> In this context, HKBP as a product of the RMG mission inherited a theological structure that tends to judge local culture from the perspective of Western universality. According to Afaradi, decolonization of theology is not merely replacing Western symbols with local ones, but rather dismantling oppressive knowledge structures and returning interpretive authority to local communities.<sup>34</sup> In other words, local congregations are seen not as objects that need to be Christianized, but as subjects who participate in interpreting and living the faith. In this framework, the mission of the church no longer means bringing the Gospel to custom, but finding the Gospel in custom.

HKBP Parsaoran Dame, as one of the Pagaran (Islamic community) from Dairi District, demonstrates early efforts toward this form of decolonization. The church recognizes the importance of preserving Batak customs and culture, particularly through the use of the Batak language in sermons, songs, and social activities. This effort marks a paradigm shift from a conversion mission to a dialogical mission. However, as the author has observed, the colonial paradigm is still evident in the way some church ministers understand mission as a task of bringing people to Christ and prioritizing the proclamation of the Word without considering the traditional context.<sup>35</sup> This attitude shows that the decolonization of theology has not yet fully occurred because the old knowledge structures are still operating.<sup>36</sup> The HKBP Parsaoran Dame Church still views tradition as a tool for the Gospel, not a theological

<sup>28</sup> Interview with L. Sihombing, Elder of HKBP Parsaoran Dame, June 25, 2025

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Raja Parhata M. Sitorus, Parbuluan, July 10, 2025.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Mrs. M. Hutabarat, HKBP naposo bulung activist, June 30, 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mr. J. Simanjuntak, senior HKBP congregation, July 5, 2025.

<sup>32</sup> A. Afaradi, *Decolonization of Asian and Pacific Theology* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2025), 42.

<sup>33</sup> Sita T. van Bemmelen, *Christianity, Colonization, and Gender Relations in North Sumatra* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 88–89.

<sup>34</sup> Afaradi, *Decolonizing Theology of Asia and the Pacific*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with St. S. Pasaribup, HKBP Parsaoran Dame, 2025.

<sup>36</sup> Afaradi, *Decolonizing Theology of Asia and the Pacific*, 66.

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companion. Contextual theology, however, assumes that every culture has the potential for revelation and can become a locus theologicus where God reveals Himself.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the decolonization of the mission at HKBP Parsaoran Dame must be directed toward developing a new theological awareness rooted in the faith experiences of the HKBP Parsaoran Dame congregation. Christian faith did not come from outside but grew within Batak culture. This paradigm shifts the mission's focus from doctrinal transmission to epistemic empowerment, namely, revitalizing the Batak people's ability to understand God through their traditional values and symbols.<sup>38</sup>

In the context of HKBP Parsaoran Dame, epistemic liberation is evident in the congregation's efforts to understand theology from their own experiences. Cultural liberation is evident in the negotiation between tradition and liturgy, while practical liberation is present in the effort to build a ministry based on mutual cooperation and local solidarity that is always in dialogue with culture. Faith and culture meet through a mission free from the colonial paradigm that shackles society in triumphalist theology. In this way, the church moves toward a new paradigm of collaborative and dialogical mission, rather than a hegemonic and conversionist one.

### Liturgy as a Space for Decolonization Practice

Robert Sibarani in *Toba Batak Local Wisdom* emphasizes that Batak customs are not only a social system, but also a religious system that contains spiritual values such as respect, balance, and togetherness.<sup>39</sup> The principle of *Daliha Na Tolu* forms the ethical basis for human relationships with others and with God. This value aligns with the theology of love and fellowship in the Christian faith.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, liturgical inculturation means recognizing that traditional values can be a theological vehicle for expressing faith in Christ. In the context of HKBP Parsaoran Dame, liturgical inculturation is evident in the use of the Batak language in worship, intercessory prayers, and hymns. Church activities such as the *gotilon* feast and major holiday celebrations incorporate traditional elements, such as the wearing of *ulos* (traditional cloth) for delegated servants or families celebrating thanksgiving.<sup>41</sup> However, the boundaries between church liturgy and traditional rites are still strictly guarded.

Decolonizing the liturgy means transcending these fears. According to Ruth Meyers, a missionary liturgy is one that integrates local symbols without losing the integrity of the faith.<sup>42</sup> Thus, liturgy is no longer the exclusive domain of the Western church, but a celebration of the faith of local people lived out in their own language and symbols. The HKBP Parsaoran Dame Church needs to understand that inculturation is not simply incorporating customs into worship, but rather allowing customs to speak as the language of faith.<sup>43</sup> Beyond liturgy, traditional values can also enrich diaconal practices. In a field interview, a congregant stated, "When there's a traditional celebration, we help each other without being asked."<sup>44</sup> This statement demonstrates the gap between vibrant traditional solidarity and the bureaucratic system of church diaconia. However, according to Sibarani, the values of *marsiadapari* (mutual cooperation) and *marsilupahon* (mutual support) are the most concrete manifestations of love in Batak culture.<sup>45</sup> Churches seeking to decolonize their mission need to integrate these values into their social ministry. This aligns with Elia Maggang's concept of blue diakonia, namely, church ministry rooted in the local context and taking place with, not for, the community.<sup>46</sup> By making traditional values the basis of diaconia, HKBP Parsaoran Dame not only preserves culture, but also strengthens the spirituality of contextual service.

### Integration of Traditional Practices in the HKBP Parsaoran Dame Liturgy

One concrete manifestation of the decolonization process at HKBP Parsaoran Dame is the church's efforts to integrate elements of Batak customs into the liturgical order of worship and church celebrations. This integration is the result of a long dialogue between traditional leaders, church ministers, and the congregation, who attempted to negotiate the balance between fidelity to church teachings and respect for local cultural identity. Observations and

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<sup>37</sup>Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 12–14.

<sup>38</sup>Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 55.

<sup>39</sup>Interview with Sintua L. Sihombing, HKBP Parsaoran Dame, 2024.

<sup>40</sup>Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Theology in the North Atlantic World* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 107.

<sup>41</sup>Robert Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak: Values, Traditions, and Religiosity* (Medan: Pustaka Wahana, 2019), 44–46.

<sup>42</sup>Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 107.

<sup>43</sup>Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak*, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Ruth A. Meyers, "Missional Church, Missional Liturgy," *Theology Today* 67, no. 1 (2010): 42.

<sup>45</sup>Mauly Purba, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Case of the Gondang Sabangunan in HKBP," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 215.

<sup>46</sup>Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak*, 72–74.

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interviews revealed that several traditional practices have become an integral part of liturgical celebrations at HKBP Parsaoran Dame, albeit with certain limitations and adjustments.

First, The use of the Toba Batak language in sermons, prayers and spiritual songs has become a characteristic of worship at HKBP.. The Batak language not only functions as a means of communication, but also as a theological expression that is full of cultural values such as respect (*somba*), togetherness (*marsiadapari*), and affection (*elek*).). The use of this language shows that the church views local languages as languages of faith, not just secular media. This is in line with the spirit of Afaradi's contextual theology which places local language and experience as the locus of God's revelation.<sup>47</sup>

Second, the giving and wearing of *ulos* during certain liturgical occasions, such as ministerial ordinations, missionary commendations, or family thanksgiving services, has been formally accepted in local worship practices. *Ulos* is understood not as a magical symbol, but as a sign of love, respect, and fellowship. In a liturgical context, the wearing of *ulos* affirms the incarnational dimension of Christian faith, the concrete love of God that touches human life.<sup>48</sup> This process illustrates what Bhabha calls the third space, a space of negotiation between theological and cultural meanings, where traditional symbols acquire new meanings without losing their original value.<sup>49</sup>

Third, the use of traditional Batak music, particularly the *gondang sabangunan* (traditional Batak music), has begun to be accepted in major celebrations such as Christmas, the *Gotilon* Festival, and church anniversaries. Although not used throughout the liturgy, this traditional music is typically played at the beginning and end of the service as a form of communal thanksgiving and joy. The presence of *gondang* in the church space marks a significant shift in how the congregation understands the sanctity of the liturgy, from an exclusive sacredness to a dialogical and contextual sanctity..<sup>50</sup> Fourth, in the death ceremony or *ulaon saur matua*, the HKBP Parsaoran Dame church permits the holding of traditional prayers outside the church building, under joint coordination between church servants and the *raja parhata* (traditional leader). This prayer serves as a final tribute to the deceased and also as a statement of the family's faith in eternal life. This practice combines religious and cultural dimensions, demonstrating how tradition and faith can enrich each other.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the integration of these traditional practices demonstrates that HKBP Parsaoran Dame is moving toward an inculturative and decolonial liturgical model. The church no longer views tradition as a threat to faith, but rather as a space of encounter where the Gospel is lived out in the symbols, language, and music that live within the Batak community.

### Conclusion

This research confirms that the decolonization of the church's mission in HKBP Parsaoran Dame is not merely a cultural or aesthetic project to incorporate customs into the liturgy, but rather a profound theological movement of epistemic, cultural, and practical liberation from the colonial legacy that has long shaped the way the church understands itself, its culture, and its mission. Decolonization of mission is an effort to reposition the relationship between the Gospel and customs, no longer in a hierarchical position that places culture as an object to be sanctified, but as equal partners in revealing the mystery of God in the Toba Batak context.

From an epistemic theological perspective, this study demonstrates that theological colonialism still leaves a deep imprint on church consciousness. The theology inherited from the German RMG mission still places the truth of faith within a universal, rational, and exclusive Western horizon, so that Batak customs are often viewed as secondary elements. However, the experience of the HKBP Parsaoran Dame congregation demonstrates the dynamics of resistance to this epistemic structure. In the liturgy, the Batak language, the *ulos* symbol, and the *gondang sabangunan* music have been rehabilitated as legitimate languages of faith. This process marks the revival of southern epistemology as described by Afaradi: that true theological knowledge does not arise solely from universities or synods, but from the faith experiences of local communities grappling with their own history and culture. The HKBP Parsaoran Dame Church, with all its limitations, has opened up space for its members to interpret the Gospel in their own cultural idiom. Here, decolonization is not simply replacing Western symbols with Batak ones, but reversing the flow of knowledge: from the bottom up, from the people to the structure, from the *parhata* to the pastor.

<sup>47</sup> A. Afaradi, *Decolonization of Asian and Pacific Theology* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2025), 58.

<sup>48</sup> Robert Sibarani, *Local Wisdom of the Toba Batak: Values, Traditions, and Religiosity* (Medan: Pustaka Wahana, 2019), 51.

<sup>49</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 112–115.

<sup>50</sup> Mauly Purba, "From Conflict to Reconciliation: The Case of the *Gondang Sabangunan* in HKBP," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 36, no. 2 (2005): 216.

<sup>51</sup> Observation of the *ulaon saur matua* ceremony, HKBP Parsaoran Dame, 2025.

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In terms of cultural dimensions, the research findings show that the faith practices of the HKBP Parsaoran Dame congregation create a new space that can be called a third space (Homi Bhabha). This space is not simply a blend of Christianity and tradition, but rather an arena for negotiating meaning where both symbol systems interact dynamically. Worship with gondang music, thanksgiving prayers with ulos, or the use of Batak language in sermons are not forms of syncretism, but rather authentic expressions of hybrid faith. In this space, the boundaries between the "sacred" and the "cultural" become fluid, as both are understood as part of the human experience imbued with God's presence. In other words, HKBP Parsaoran Dame has created a decolonial liturgical model that is no longer afraid of traditional symbols but instead utilizes them to express faith. This hybridity demonstrates the ability of local communities to transform colonial legacies into contextual and vibrant expressions of faith.

In social practice, this research confirms that the decolonization of mission at HKBP Parsaoran Dame does not stop at the liturgical altar, but extends to the realm of diakonia and the social life of the congregation. The church has begun to reaffirm the moral values of Dalihan Na Tolu somba marhula-hula, manat mardongan tubu, and elek marboru as the ethical foundation of service. In these values, the community rediscovers the principles of equal relationships, respect, and mutual support (marsiadapari and marsilupahon), which are truly manifestations of Christ's love in the Batak context. Thus, diakonia is no longer understood as one-way assistance from the institution to the congregation, but as a practice of shared solidarity, as emphasized by Elia Maggang in the concept of blue diakonia, a service that takes place with, not for, the community. HKBP Parsaoran Dame is learning to become a church with roots and brothers, not just an institution providing social services.

From a contextual mission theology perspective, this study proposes a correction of the institutional *missio ecclesiae* paradigm toward the *missio culturalis* paradigm, where mission is understood as participation in God's work already at work in local history and culture. The church is no longer the center of mission, but becomes a partner of God and society in cultivating a just, dignified, and contextual life. HKBP Parsaoran Dame demonstrates how the Gospel can become a shared possession, not only in discourse, but in concrete practices through liturgy, music, and social relations. The inculturation process undertaken is not a symbolic adoption, but a spiritual transformation that allows the Christian faith to take root in Batak land without losing the universality of its love.

One important ecclesiological implication is that a decolonized church is rooted, local in character, and universal in spirit. This kind of church does not lose its Christian faith, but rather affirms that God, incarnate in Christ, is also incarnate in the history and culture of every nation. HKBP Parsaoran Dame is on the path to becoming a church that is both "Batak and Catholic," that is, universal in love and local in expression. This church model is relevant not only to the Batak people, but to all churches in Indonesia, which are still grappling with the colonial legacy and the challenges of cultural globalization.

Therefore, decolonizing the church's mission is a form of structural conversion, not merely an aesthetic inculturation. It demands a change in the way the church thinks, prays, and acts. HKBP Parsaoran Dame has shown that this process is possible: that liturgy can become a space of liberation, that customs can become a vehicle for evangelization, and that faith can take root without losing its universal direction. In this light, decolonization is not a threat to the purity of faith, but rather a path to spiritual maturity in which the Gospel truly becomes good news for humanity and its culture.

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