

## **Marapu Death Prayer as a Locus Theologicus: A Hermeneutical Reading in the Perspective of Inculturated Theology**

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### **Abstract**

This study is grounded in the phenomenon of double religious belonging among Catholic communities in Sumba who continue to perform the Marapu death prayer, a practice often perceived as potentially generating theological tension. The aim of this research is to examine the theological meaning of the Marapu death prayer and to situate it within the framework of inculturated theology. The study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic-theological design, using interviews, participant observation, and thematic analysis, which are then interpreted through a Translation Model based on the principle of double fidelity. The findings indicate that the Marapu death prayer embodies five principal meanings: death as a cosmic transition, sacrifice as a mediation of divine relationship, ancestral relation as a transgenerational community, cosmic harmony, and awareness of divine hiddenness. These findings affirm that the practice does not represent a conflict of faith, but rather a religious expression that opens an analogical space for theological dialogue. Consequently, the Marapu death prayer may be understood as a *locus theologicus* that enriches contextual theology and encourages a more dialogical, contextual, and non-reductionist pastoral approach within the Church.

**Keywords:** Marapu death ritual; locus theologicus; inculturated theology; double religious belonging; hermeneutical theology.

### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini berangkat dari persoalan praktik berlapis (*double religious belonging*) di kalangan umat Katolik Sumba yang tetap melaksanakan doa kematian Marapu, yang sering dipandang berpotensi menimbulkan ketegangan teologis. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji makna teologis doa kematian Marapu serta menempatkannya dalam kerangka teologi inkulturatif. Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain

etnografis-teologis melalui wawancara, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis tematik, yang kemudian diinterpretasikan menggunakan Model Penerjemahan dengan prinsip *double fidelity*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa doa kematian Marapu mengandung lima makna utama: kematian sebagai transisi kosmis, pengorbanan sebagai mediasi relasi ilahi, relasi dengan leluhur sebagai komunitas lintas generasi, harmoni kosmis, dan kesadaran akan ketersembunyian ilahi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa praktik tersebut bukan konflik iman, melainkan ekspresi religius yang membuka ruang dialog teologis secara analogis. Implikasinya, doa kematian Marapu dapat dipahami sebagai *locus theologicus* yang memperkaya teologi kontekstual dan mendorong pendekatan pastoral Gereja yang lebih dialogis, kontekstual, dan non-reduksionis.

**Kata kunci:** Ritual kematian Marapu; Locus theologicus; Teologi inkulturasi; Keterikatan religius ganda; teologi hermeneutik

## 1. Introduction

Globalization marked by increased human mobility, intensified cultural exchange, and increasingly complex interactions among religious traditions challenges the Catholic Church to critically re-examine its paradigm of evangelization.<sup>1</sup> In this context, evangelization can no longer be adequately understood merely as the geographical expansion of mission territories or as the one-directional transmission of doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it must be conceived as a dialogical process that enables a reciprocal encounter between the Catholic faith and local cultures. Such a process requires the Church to remain faithful to the core of the *kerygma* while also being open to the symbols, languages, and structures of meaning that shape the identity of a given community.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, inculturation cannot be reduced to a superficial adaptation of external forms; instead, it must be understood as a theological process that integrates the Word of God into the historical and cultural dynamics of human societies.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary Church teaching affirms that inculturation is a dialogical and reciprocal process, as emphasized by Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio*<sup>5</sup> and Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.<sup>6</sup> Both stress that the religious experience of a community is not an obstacle to evangelization but rather a starting point for the deeper rooting of the Gospel within culture. From this perspective, culture is not understood as something to be replaced, but as a space in which faith can grow and be authentically expressed. Consequently, evangelization becomes a process of mutual transformation that situates the dialogue between

<sup>1</sup> Jean Claude Attard, —Theology as a Roundabout : Theology from the Mediterranean after Veritatis Gaudium,| *International Journal of Public Theology* 19 (2025): 23–39.

<sup>2</sup> Vivencio Ballano, —Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization,| *Religions* 11, no. 101 (2020): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11020101>.

<sup>3</sup> Marcos Pereira Rufino, —Inculturation and Environmental Struggles : Catholic Church , Public Sphere and Anthropocentric Preservationism in Brazil Inculturation and Environmental Struggles : Catholic Church , Public Sphere and Anthropocentric Preservationism in Brazil Inculturação,| *Anuario Antropologi*, no. April 2025 (2023).

<sup>4</sup> Liang Zhang, —The Globalization of Catholicism as Expressed in the Sacramental Narratives of Jiangnan Catholics from the Late Ming to Early Republican Period,| *Religions*, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Yohanes Paulus II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Jakarta: Departemen Dokumentasi dan Penerangan Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Paus Fransiskus, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

Gospel and culture as a space of reciprocal enrichment without compromising their respective identities.<sup>7</sup>

In the Indonesian context characterized by cultural and religious pluralism these dynamics are clearly manifested in the relationship between the Catholic Church and local belief systems. One such context that reveals this complexity is the Sumbanese community with its Marapu tradition. Marapu is a belief system that not only regulates ritual practices but also shapes the community's worldview concerning life, death, and the relationship with the Divine. Within Marapu cosmology, human beings are not understood as isolated individuals, but as part of a relational network encompassing the world of the living, the realm of the ancestors, and the transcendent reality.<sup>8</sup> This relationship is dynamic and continuous, extending even beyond death. From this perspective, death is not conceived as the end of existence, but as a transitional stage toward continued life within the ancestral community.<sup>9</sup> The deceased are believed to maintain an ongoing relationship with the family and community they leave behind. Consequently, death rituals hold profound significance not merely as a final act of respect, but as a process that ensures the harmonious continuity of relationships between the living and the ancestral realm. It is within this context that the funeral prayer (*katoba*) assumes a central role.<sup>10</sup>

Marapu funeral prayers are not merely emotional expressions of loss; rather, they constitute religious texts that embody a structured system of meaning.<sup>11</sup> Through these prayers, the community articulates its beliefs concerning the existence of ancestors, the relationship between human beings and the transcendent realm, and the cosmic order that governs life.<sup>12</sup> The symbols present within the ritual such as animal offerings, megalithic tombstones, and lamentation chants are inseparable from the theological meanings embedded in the prayers. Thus, Marapu funeral prayers should be understood not only as cultural practices, but also as living expressions of faith within the community. Based on this context, the present study focuses on a central issue, namely the theological meaning contained within the text of Marapu funeral prayers.<sup>13</sup> This focus is particularly significant in light of the social reality of *double religious belonging* among Sumbanese Catholics. Many members of the community formally identify with and actively participate in the liturgical life of the Catholic Church, while at the same time continuing to engage in Marapu prayer practices, especially in

<sup>7</sup> Fransiska Widyawati, Yohanes S Lon, and Hendrikus Midun, —Mission and Inculturation : Preserving Local Language and Culture in the Indonesian Church,| *Aosis*, 2023, 1–10.

<sup>8</sup> Herman Punda Panda, —Perjalanan Jiwa Ke ‘Kampung Leluhur’ Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik,| *Lumen Veritatis*, 2020, 197–220.

<sup>9</sup> Stefanus Si, Herman Punda Panda, and Raymundus I Made Sudhiarsa, —Umat Katolik Sumba Di Tengah Himpitan Tradisi Dan Kepercayaan Marapu: Menyimak Dan Menemukan Upaya Pastoral Untuk Menumbuhkan Pengetahuan Iman Umat Katolik Sumba,| *Media Jurnal Filsafat Dan Teologi* 5, no. 1 (2024): 97–112.

<sup>10</sup> Stefanus Bili Daga, Vinsensius Bawa Toron, and Yohanis Masneno, —Konsep Keselamatan Dalam Kepercayaan Marapu Dan Relevansinya Dengan Iman Katolik,| *Al-Mada* 8, no. 2 (2025): 257–67.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Setio, —The Persistence Of Ancestor Veneration : A Dialogical Relationship Between Christianity And Indigenous Religions,| *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 2019, 205–26.

<sup>12</sup> Lukman Solihin, —Mengantar Arwah Jenazah Ke Parai Marapu : Upacara Kubur Batu Pada Masyarakat Umalulu , Sumba Timur Delivering Spirits To Parai Marapu :,| *Pusat Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Kebudayaan*, 2013, 1–22.

<sup>13</sup> Evelien Fitri Ugadje, —Mapping the Development of Christology and Contextual Theology in Papua: A Systematic Literature Review (2014–2024),| *Religion: Journal of Inter-Religious and Cross-Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2024): 185–200, <https://doi.org/10.15575/rjsalb.v9i2.46664>.

funeral rites.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon reflects a dynamic of faith that cannot be adequately explained in terms of simple acceptance or rejection of Catholic belief.

This phenomenon raises a fundamental question: does this practice represent a form of inconsistency in faith, or does it even contradict the teachings of the Church? From the perspective of the faithful, however, it is not experienced as a conflict. Rather, it is understood as part of their cultural responsibility and their ongoing relationship with ancestors, which remains significant in their lives.<sup>15</sup> Within this view, Catholic faith and Marapu practices are not seen as mutually exclusive, but as coexisting within everyday life.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, from a theological standpoint, this situation cannot be separated from a number of critical concerns. The role of ancestors in Marapu prayers, which in certain contexts may be interpreted as mediatory, has the potential to create tension with Catholic doctrine, which affirms the unique role of God as the sole source of salvation.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the boundary between cultural veneration of ancestors and religious practices with theological implications is often unclear, thereby opening the possibility of ambiguity in the praxis of faith.<sup>18</sup> In pastoral practice, this gives rise to a dilemma: how can the Church appreciate and engage local culture without compromising the integrity of its doctrinal teachings?

As a social fact, this phenomenon indicates that the primary issue is not necessarily experienced by the faithful as a conflict of faith, but rather as an effort to maintain harmony between religious identity and cultural heritage.<sup>19</sup> Precisely because it is not perceived as problematic, the phenomenon becomes all the more important to examine. Without careful and in-depth reflection, the Church risks overlooking the lived dynamics of faith within the community.<sup>20</sup> Conversely, an approach that hastily imposes normative judgments may reduce the richness of local religious experience.<sup>21</sup> The urgency of this study becomes even more evident when considering its long-term implications. A lack of sensitivity to this phenomenon may create a growing distance between the Church and the faithful, and may even encourage the emergence of hidden or non-integrated expressions of faith.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in the absence of adequate theological understanding, such practices may be simplistically labeled as syncretism, thereby neglecting the depth of meaning they embody. Therefore, an approach is needed that can engage this phenomenon both critically and dialogically.<sup>23</sup>

Within the framework of contextual theology, Marapu funeral prayers may be understood as a *locus theologicus*, that is, a space in which human experiences of faith are

<sup>14</sup> Si, Panda, and Sudhiarsa, —Umat Katolik Sumba Di Tengah Himpitan Tradisi Dan Kepercayaan Marapu: Menyimak Dan Menemukan Upaya Pastoral Untuk Menumbuhkan Pengetahuan Iman Umat Katolik Sumba. |

<sup>15</sup> Daga, Toron, and Masneno, —Konsep Keselamatan Dalam Kepercayaan Marapu Dan Relevansinya Dengan Iman Katolik. |

<sup>16</sup> Widyawati, Lon, and Midun, —Mission and Inculturation: Preserving Local Language and Culture in the Indonesian Church. |

<sup>17</sup> Attard, —Theology as a Roundabout: Theology from the Mediterranean after Veritatis Gaudium. |

<sup>18</sup> Michael E Connors, —Toward Inculturated Preaching, | *Religions*, 2025.

<sup>19</sup> Setio, —The Persistence Of Ancestor Veneration: A Dialogical Relationship Between Christianity And Indigenous Religions. |

<sup>20</sup> Yvonna S Lincoln and Egon G Guba, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CREDO* (London: Left Coast Press, Inc, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Bien Van Duong, —The Contextualization of Catholic Theology in Vietnam: An Endeavor to Integrate Christian Faith within the Local Cultural and Religious Frameworks, | *JCSR* 5, no. 2 (2025).

<sup>23</sup> E.P.D Martasudjita, —Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia, | *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 10, no. 1 (2010): 39–60.

expressed through symbols, language, and cultural rituals.<sup>24</sup> This tradition not only reflects a system of belief, but also embodies implicit theological reflections on the relationship between human beings, ancestors, and the Divine.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Marapu funeral prayers should be interpreted as religious texts that contain a structured theological meaning open to systematic analysis. However, existing scholarship has not yet fully developed such a reading. Anthropological studies have tended to emphasize the descriptive and performative aspects of the ritual, while the theological dimension of the prayer texts has received limited attention.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, studies on liturgical inculturation have largely focused on external elements such as artistic forms and language without adequately engaging the deeper symbolic meanings embedded in indigenous prayer texts.<sup>27</sup> This gap highlights the need for a new approach capable of integrating cultural analysis with theological reflection in a more comprehensive manner.<sup>28</sup>

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine the theological meaning embedded in Marapu funeral prayers by employing a hermeneutical approach that enables dialogue between the Catholic faith and local culture. The central research questions are: how is the structure of theological meaning articulated within these prayers, and how can such meaning be interpreted within the framework of inculturated theology? To address these questions, this study adopts the Translation Model, which emphasizes a double fidelity to both the Gospel and culture. This approach allows for a non-reductive reading, opening space for a creative dialogue between two horizons of meaning. Through this framework, the symbols and language found in Marapu funeral prayers can be understood as articulations of religious experience that possess their own internal coherence.

This study is expected to contribute to three key areas. Theologically, it enriches the understanding of how local religious texts can serve as sources of faith reflection. Methodologically, it offers an integrative hermeneutical approach. Pastorally, it provides a foundation for developing more contextual and dialogical forms of evangelization. Ultimately, this study affirms that the dialogue between the Gospel and culture constitutes an essential dimension of the Church's mission. By focusing on the theological meaning of Marapu funeral prayers, it seeks to demonstrate that local traditions are not merely objects of adaptation, but also subjects of theological reflection capable of enriching the understanding of faith within the Indonesian context.

## 2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic-theological design to explore in depth the practice of Marapu death prayer (*pa hengingu/katoba*) within the context of Catholic life in Sumba. This approach is selected because it enables a comprehensive analysis of symbolic meanings, ritual structures, and lived religious experiences embedded in

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<sup>24</sup> Stephen B Bevans and Taheafe Williams Katalina, *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> Panda, —Perjalanan Jiwa Ke ‘Kampung Leluhur’ Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik. |

<sup>26</sup> Revinda Syahniza Renata and Diah Kartini Lasman, —The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Ritual of Marapu in West Sumba : Funeral Ceremony, | *Atlantis Press* 593, no. Inusharts 2020 (2021): 236–41.

<sup>27</sup> Amadea Prajna Putra Mahardika, —Analisis Teologi Inkulturasi Lukisan Perjamuan Kana Dan Gerakan Sego Mubeng Gereja St Antonius Kotabaru Yogyakarta, | *Studia Philosophica et Theologica* 24, no. 2 (2024): 152–69.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Wilfred, —Asian Theological Ferment (For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives), | *IJPTH* 1, no. 2 (2020): 73–90, <https://doi.org/10.47043/ijpth.v1i2.11>.

the practice, while also providing a foundation for theological reflection grounded in empirical data. Thus, this study is not merely descriptive but also hermeneutical.<sup>29</sup>

The framework of theological analysis refers to the Translation Model developed by Stephen B. Bevans. This model is based on the principle of double fidelity, namely fidelity to the Gospel and fidelity to culture. Within this framework, inculturation is understood as a process of translating the meaning of faith into the symbolic categories of local culture in a critical and reflective manner, without engaging in direct equivalence (automatic equivalence). Therefore, the symbols within the Marapu death prayer are understood as religious expressions possessing internal coherence within the local cosmology, while remaining open to analogical interpretation in the light of Catholic theology.<sup>30</sup>

This study involves nine participants selected purposively based on their direct involvement in ritual practices and their knowledge of the Marapu tradition. The participants consist of two *rato* (Marapu priests) (R1-R2), four Catholics with a Marapu background (K1-K4), and three Catholic priests serving in Sumba (I1-I3). To maintain anonymity while ensuring data traceability, each participant is assigned a code consistently used in presenting direct quotations in the findings section. This strategy ensures transparency in the relationship between empirical data and analytical interpretation.<sup>31</sup>

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews and participatory observation from September to November 2025 in Central Sumba Regency. The interviews focused on exploring the structure and content of the death prayer, the meaning of ritual symbols, the relationship between humans, ancestors, and the divine, as well as the experiences of participants involved in the ritual. In this process, direct quotations from participants were systematically integrated to maintain closeness to the data and avoid interpretative distortion.<sup>32</sup>

Empirically, the practice of Marapu death prayer is understood by the *rato* as a means of guiding the soul and maintaining its relationship with the divine, as indicated by the belief that buffalo sacrifice serves as a companion for the soul's journey toward God (R1),<sup>33</sup> while prayer is interpreted as an effort to ensure that the spirit reaches its final destination in a directed manner (R2).<sup>34</sup> From the perspective of Catholic participants, involvement in the ritual is understood as an expression of kinship relations and respect for ancestors (K1, K2),<sup>35</sup> while also reflecting the continuity of cultural practices within the plurality of religious identities (K3, K4).<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, priests view this practice as a space for theological

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<sup>29</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CREDO*.45

<sup>30</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.27

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CREDO*.202

<sup>32</sup> Ballano, —Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization.16

<sup>33</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak, Marapu figures from the Prai Au-Majaga Traditional Village, Central Sumba, "Interview", September 25, 2025, in Prai Au, Central Sumba, NTT

<sup>34</sup> Umbu Setu Katadak, Marapu figures from the Prai Au-Majaga Traditional Village, Central Sumba, "Interview", September 25, 2025, in Prai Au, Central Sumba, NTT

<sup>35</sup> Vinsensius Reku Tibu and Yohanes Bili, Lay Pastoral and Religious Education Facilitators (PUGA) at St. Peter and Paul Lediwatu Station, St. Clement Katiku Loku Parish, —Interview, 1 October 7, 2025, in Lediwatu, Central Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara.

<sup>36</sup> Stefanus Radjang and Yustina Nipu, Lay Pastoral and Religious Education Facilitators (PUGA), —Interview, 1 October 10, 2024, in Lediwatu, Central Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara.

reflection containing a universal longing for salvation (I1),<sup>37</sup> symbolic potential for explaining the meaning of sacrifice (I2),<sup>38</sup> and a field for pastoral dialogue in the process of inculturation (I3).<sup>39</sup>

Participatory observation was conducted in two death rituals to directly observe ritual stages, liturgical language, symbolic gestures, and the social context of ritual performance. These observations included the use of gongs as markers of death, the offering of traditional cloth, and the practice of animal sacrifice. Observational data functioned to confirm, complement, and deepen the interview findings.<sup>40</sup>

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis with systematic and transparent procedures. The first stage was data familiarization, involving repeated reading of interview transcripts and field notes to gain a comprehensive understanding. The second stage was open coding, in which units of meaning were inductively identified from raw data, producing initial codes such as —guiding the soul,‡ —offering as mediation,‡ —relationship with ancestors,‡ —cosmic harmony,‡ and —divine hiddenness.‡The third stage was axial coding, involving the grouping of initial codes into broader thematic categories based on conceptual relationships, including: (1) symbolic meaning of the death prayer, (2) function of sacrifice in the ritual, (3) cosmological relations: human–ancestor–divine, and (4) the social dimension of ritual continuity. The fourth stage was selective coding, which generated core themes as a synthesis of the entire dataset, namely: death as cosmic transition, sacrifice as mediation of divine relations, intergenerational community, cosmic harmony, and intuition of divine hiddenness.<sup>41</sup>

To ensure analytical transparency, the relationships among initial codes, thematic categories, and core themes are systematically organized as follows:

Table 1

<b>Code Term</b>	<b>Thematic Category</b>	<b>Core Theme</b>
Soul Escorting	Function of Death Ritual	Death as a Cosmic Transition
Offering as Mediation	Function of Sacrifice	Symbolic Human-Divine Relationship
Relationship with Ancestors	Cosmological Relations	Intergenerational Community

<sup>37</sup> Marcianus Djou, Priest serving in the Diocese of Weetebula, Sumba, —Interview,‡ Weetebula, November 5, 2025.

<sup>38</sup> Bernabas Bili Ngongo, Priest serving in the Diocese of Weetebula, Sumba, —Interview,‡ Weetebula, November 5, 2025.

<sup>39</sup> Kristoforus Y. Ngasi, Priest serving in the Diocese of Weetebula, Sumba, —Interview,‡ Weetebula, November 5, 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Revinda Syahniza Renata and Diah Kartini Lasman, —The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Ritual of Marapu in West Sumba: Funeral Ceremony,‡ 2021.238

<sup>41</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CREDO*.

Cosmic Harmony	Cosmological Structure	Balance of the World
Divine Hiddenness	Implicit Theological Meaning	Religious Intuition of the Transcendent

The results of the thematic analysis are then interpreted theologically through Bevans' Translation Model in two stages. The first stage is the identification of religious intuitions embedded in symbols and ritual practices, such as the concept of divine hiddenness, relationships with ancestors, and orientation toward cosmic harmony.<sup>42</sup> The second stage is the interpretation of these intuitions within Catholic theological categories in an analogical manner, while maintaining the integrity of the original meanings in accordance with the principle of double fidelity and avoiding automatic equivalence.<sup>43</sup>

The validity and reliability of the study are ensured through triangulation of sources and methods. The perspectives of *rato*, lay participants, and priests are compared to test data consistency, while the integration of interviews and participatory observation is used to strengthen empirical findings. In addition, limited member checking is conducted to ensure the alignment between the researcher's interpretation and participants' experiences.<sup>44</sup>

This study also considers the researcher's reflexivity as a Catholic theologian. This position provides depth in theological analysis but also carries the potential for interpretative bias. Therefore, the researcher consciously maintains a balance between critical analysis and respect for the meaning system of the Marapu tradition as an autonomous religious reality. Although Bevans' Translation Model offers a strong framework for dialogue between faith and culture, this approach has limitations, particularly in the potential reduction of symbols and the limited attention to the performative dimension of ritual. These limitations are addressed by strengthening the empirical basis through direct observation and contextual analysis that integrally considers social, symbolic, and cosmological dimensions.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, this research methodology not only produces a rich ethnographic description but also provides a transparent, systematic, and traceable analytical process, thereby strengthening the interconnection between field data, thematic analysis, and theological reflection within the overall structure of the study.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

#### 3.1 Findings

##### 3.1.1 Empirical Description and Thematic Analysis

Based on the results of participatory observation and field interviews conducted in the traditional villages of Kambajawa and Prai Au-Majaga, Anakalang, Central Sumba, East Nusa Tenggara, death rituals within the Marapu tradition constitute a complex and highly structured religious practice. This rite functions not merely as a customary mechanism but as a symbolic system that organizes the relationships between humans, ancestors, and divine entities within an integrated cosmological framework. Ontologically, death is understood as

<sup>42</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.31

<sup>43</sup> Martasudjita, —Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia.145

<sup>44</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *THE CONSTRUCTIVIST CREDO*.314

<sup>45</sup> Wilfred, —Asian Theological Ferment ( For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives ).178

an existential transition: the human body (*táda* or *haruma*) is separated from the soul (*ndewa* or *hamangu*), which is believed to continue its journey toward *praingu Marapu*.<sup>46</sup> In this context, death rituals serve both as a means of escorting the soul and as a process of restoring cosmic and social equilibrium.

Various ritual elements possess specific symbolic functions. Sacrificial animals, particularly buffaloes and pigs, play a central role in the ritual structure. A large male buffalo is used as a vehicle to accompany the spirit of the deceased, while other animals are designated for maintaining communal relations with the ancestors. One *rato* emphasized that—the buffalo being sacrificed is not arbitrary, but serves as a companion so that the deceased may reach God (R1),<sup>47</sup> while another *rato* stated that prayers are recited so that—the spirit is not disturbed and may proceed straight toward its origin (R2).<sup>48</sup>

In addition, material symbols such as traditional textiles (*hinggi, lau pahudu*) and *mamuli* (traditional gold ornaments) signify continuity of identity and social status, while also functioning as spiritual provisions. The *mamuli* is understood not merely as an ornament, but as a symbol of reverence toward the ancestors and family identity. Other elements such as betel nut and gongs reinforce social cohesion while simultaneously connecting the human and cosmic dimensions (R1, R2).<sup>49</sup> Prayers or *katoba*, recited by the *rato* at various stages of the ritual, function as a mediation of the soul’s journey, a petition for the well-being of the family, and a means of communication with the ancestors. The structure of prayers within the Marapu death ritual reveals a consistent symbolic pattern, as summarized in the following table:

**Table 2 : Marapu Prayer<sup>50</sup>**

Ritual Stage	Prayer (Anakalang Language)	Translation & Analysis	Symbolic Meaning
At the time of death	<i>Malla, mamapa-mama Marapu, mamapa-mama Marapu tillu Marapu mannu</i>	O, the hidden One is singular yet comprises three persons. The Divine has called (the deceased) back; the foot has slipped, the hand has let go.	Emphasizes the triadic concept of divinity, the soul's journey to the Creator, and human finitude.
<b>First Animal Sacrifice</b> (large male water buffalo)	<i>Malla, kayi pamamamu karra bauwu. D'a tana lowi d'agu-d'a watu walla</i>	O, accept this betel nut. The buffalo serves as an escort until (the soul) reaches His side	The buffalo sacrifice functions as a medium of reverence and a spiritual companion for the journey.

<sup>46</sup> Umbu Pura Woha, *Injil Dan Merapu, Marapusumba.Com* (Kupang: marapusumba.com, 2020).101

<sup>47</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak, "Interview"

<sup>48</sup> Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

<sup>49</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak and Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

<sup>50</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak and Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

	<i>waid'agu. D'angnga lauta tana</i>		
<b>Second Animal Sacrifice</b> (water buffalo for communal feast)	<i>Malla kayi jala pa mamamu karra bauwu. Auhu tutu amu-wai tutu innu</i>	O, accept this betel nut. This buffalo is for all the departed ancestral spirits	Symbolizes communication with the ancestors, facilitating both spiritual and social integration.

The empirical data were subsequently analyzed using a thematic approach, yielding five interrelated and integrated themes:

First, death as a cosmic transition; death is understood as a process of passage toward divine reality rather than the end of existence. The death ritual functions as a means of escorting the soul, as emphasized by participants (R1, R2).<sup>51</sup> This finding indicates that death prayer serves as a mediation of the human ontological journey toward its origin.

Second, sacrifice as a mediation of divine relations; animal sacrifice possesses a multilayered symbolic structure that connects humans with the divine and with the ancestors. The first offering is vertically oriented, while the second is communal in nature. This demonstrates that sacrifice constitutes a form of symbolic communication that bridges the relationship between humans and transcendent reality (R1, R2).<sup>52</sup>

Third, the relationship with ancestors as an intergenerational community; ancestors are understood as an integral part of a community that remains in continuous relationship with the living. A Catholic participant stated that —we participate in the prayers because it is part of the family and our relationship with those who have passed away| (K1, K2),<sup>53</sup> while another informant affirmed the continuity of this tradition within the family (K3, K4).<sup>54</sup> These findings indicate that death rituals function to preserve the continuity of intergenerational relationships within both social and religious frameworks.

Fourth, cosmic harmony as a ritual structure; death rituals reflect a cosmological structure that emphasizes balance between the upper world (the divine), the middle world (humanity), and the lower world (the ancestors). The use of symbols such as traditional textiles, *mamuli*, gongs, and communal practices demonstrates the integration of social identity and cosmic order (R1, R2).<sup>55</sup> Thus, the ritual is not only religious in nature but also serves to maintain social stability and cosmic equilibrium.

Fifth, an intuition of divine hiddenness; the expression *malla mamapamama Marapu* reflects an awareness of a divine reality that is hidden yet present. One priest interpreted that within the prayer there is —a longing for salvation, even though it is not yet fully understood in the light of Christ| (I1),<sup>56</sup> while another priest identified sacrificial symbolism as a point of

<sup>51</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak and Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

<sup>52</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak and Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

<sup>53</sup> Vinsensius Reku Tibu and Yohanes Bili, —Interview,|

<sup>54</sup> Stefanus Radjang and Yustina Nipu, —Interview|

<sup>55</sup> Umbu Magawi Sakak and Umbu Setu Katadak, "Interview"

<sup>56</sup> Marcianus Djou, —Interview|

theological convergence (I2, I3).<sup>57</sup> This indicates that the Marapu death prayer embodies a religious intuition of the Transcendent.

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 Marapu Death Prayer in the Hermeneutical Perspective of the Translation Model

The theological analysis of the Marapu death prayer in this study explicitly departs from the empirical findings processed through thematic analysis, namely: (1) death as a cosmic transition, (2) sacrifice as a mediation of divine relations, (3) the relationship with ancestors as an intergenerational community, (4) cosmic harmony as a ritual structure, and (5) an intuition of divine hiddenness. These five themes function not only as descriptive categories but also as a hermeneutical foundation that enables a systematic process of theological interpretation. In this context, the Translation Model developed by Stephen B. Bevans is employed as the primary analytical framework to mediate the relationship between local religious experience and Catholic theological reflection.

As emphasized by Bevans, —God’s revelation is always expressed in and through human culture;<sup>58</sup> therefore, inculturation cannot be reduced to mere external adaptation, but constitutes a hermeneutical process involving the translation of religious meaning from one horizon to another. Within this perspective, Marapu symbols are not positioned as objects to be replaced, but as a hermeneutical locus in which the —seeds of the Word (*semina Verbi*) are already present prior to the proclamation of the Gospel,<sup>59</sup> as noted by Peter C. Phan.<sup>59</sup> The principle of *double<sup>60</sup> fidelity* faithfulness to both the Gospel and culture serves as a critical foundation for maintaining a balance between respect for local identity and the integrity of Christian faith.<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, this approach is consistent with contemporary developments in contextual theology and the anthropology of religion, which emphasize that local religious experience constitutes a legitimate form of knowledge with its own internal rationality.<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, the Marapu death prayer is not merely read as a ritual practice, but as a symbolic text that embodies a worldview, relational structures, and the existential orientation of the Sumbanese community.<sup>63</sup>

#### 3.2.1.1 Death as Cosmic Transition and Eschatological Horizon

The theme of death as a cosmic transition within Marapu cosmology affirms that death is not the termination of existence, but a passage toward divine reality (*praingu Marapu*), which integrates the human person into a broader cosmic order. Within this framework, death is understood as a —cosmic event that connects the human world with transcendent reality,<sup>64</sup> thus carrying an ontological dimension that situates human existence within a relational dynamic between the empirical and the divine.<sup>64</sup> This perspective resonates with the thought of Karl

<sup>57</sup> Bernabas Bili Ngongo dan Kristoforus Y. Ngasi, —Interview

<sup>58</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.3

<sup>59</sup> Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003).

<sup>60</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.31

<sup>61</sup> Martasudjita, —Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia.144

<sup>62</sup> Attard, —Theology as a Roundabout : Theology from the Mediterranean after Veritatis Gaudium.128

<sup>63</sup> Panda, —Perjalanan Jiwa Ke ‘Kampung Leluhur’ Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik.1203

<sup>64</sup> Panda. 202

Rahner, who asserts that the human person possesses an inherent transcendental orientation, in which —the human being is existentially always directed toward the Transcendent.<sup>65</sup>

In Catholic theology, this orientation finds its fulfillment in the eschatological relationship with God as the *telos* of human existence. However, a significant soteriological difference emerges: within the Marapu tradition, the success of the soul's journey depends on the correctness of ritual performance,<sup>66</sup> whereas in Christianity, salvation is understood as a grace grounded in the redemptive work of Christ.<sup>67</sup> In this context, the Translation Model developed by Stephen B. Bevans enables a hermeneutical transformation in which local intuitions are not rejected but deepened within the Christian eschatological horizon —local intuition is deepened without being negated.<sup>68</sup> This approach opens a non-reductionist dialogue that enriches the theology of death as a pathway toward the fullness of life in God.

### 3.2.1.2 Sacrifice as Mediation and the Reinterpretation of Offering

The theme of sacrifice as a mediation of divine relations in the Marapu death ritual reveals a complex symbolic structure in which ritual practice functions as a performative medium connecting human beings with transcendent reality. From the perspective of ritual anthropology, Catherine Bell emphasizes that —sacrifice is a symbolic language that expresses the human relationship with the Sacred.<sup>69</sup> Thus, sacrifice is not merely a cultic act, but also a relational mechanism that establishes communication between humans, ancestors, and the Divine. The multilayered structure of offerings in Marapu reflects an implicit theological logic: the first offering symbolizes total surrender to the Divine, the second expresses intergenerational communal relations through —sharing a meal with the ancestors,<sup>70</sup> and the third represents a petition for consolation and the restoration of cosmic harmony. This pattern demonstrates the integration of vertical (transcendent) and horizontal (communal) dimensions within a unified symbolic system.<sup>70</sup>

In the light of Catholic theology, this symbolism opens a space for hermeneutical dialogue, yet it cannot be reduced to an equivalent of the sacrifice of Christ. Joseph Ratzinger affirms that —the sacrifice of Christ surpasses all forms of symbolic sacrifice because it is once and for all.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Marapu sacrifice should be understood as an anthropological expression of human self-offering rather than as an equivalent soteriological reality. Within the framework of the Translation Model, Stephen B. Bevans emphasizes that contextual theology is an effort to —express the experience of faith in a manner relevant to the cultural context without altering the core of the Gospel.<sup>72</sup> Through this analogical approach, the symbol of sacrifice is both appreciated within its cultural context and transformed in the light of Christian faith, thereby fostering a theological dialogue that is critical, contextual, and non-reductionist.

<sup>65</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).21

<sup>66</sup> Daga, Toron, and Masneno, —Konsep Keselamatan Dalam Kepercayaan Marapu Dan Relevansinya Dengan Iman Katolik.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Paus Yohanes Paulus II, *Redemptoris Missio* (Vaticana: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990).art. 9

<sup>68</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.32

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009).74

<sup>70</sup> Gunawan, —Kerbau Untuk Leluhur: Dimensi Horizontal Dalam Ritus Kematian Pada Agama Merapu,<sup>11</sup> *Jurnal Komunitas* 1 (2013): 93–100.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Theology Of The Liturgy, Collected Works XI* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).55-60

<sup>72</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.37

### 3.2.1.3 Ancestral Relations and the Communal Dimension of Faith

Relations with ancestors in Marapu cosmology affirm that human identity is intrinsically relational and cannot be understood in individualistic terms. Human life is perceived as part of a network of relationships that transcends the boundary of death, in which ancestors remain present as members of the living community, forming a —continuous cosmic community.¶ From the perspective of theological anthropology, Karl Rahner asserts that the human person is fundamentally a being who is transcendently open to others and to the mystery that surpasses the self; thus, human existence is always constituted in relation.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, relations with ancestors in Marapu are not merely symbolic, but constitute an ontological structure that undergirds both identity and communal cohesion.<sup>74</sup>

In Catholic theology, the concept of *communio sanctorum* provides an analogical framework for understanding this relational dimension. The documents of the Second Vatican Council affirm that —the communion of saints is a unity in Christ that transcends space and time (*Lumen Gentium*, art. 49).<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, ontological differences must be critically maintained. Ancestral relations in Marapu are rooted in local cosmology and kinship structures, whereas the *communio sanctorum* is grounded in participation in the mystical body of Christ.<sup>76</sup>

Through the hermeneutical approach of the Translation Model, ancestral relations may be understood as a dialogical bridge that enriches the Church’s understanding of the communal dimension of faith.<sup>77</sup> Stephen B. Bevans emphasizes that in contextual theology, the Gospel must be expressed within cultural contexts without losing its fundamental identity; thus, the process of inculturation does not reduce faith through direct equivalence, but rather preserves its integrity.<sup>78</sup> Accordingly, ancestral relations become a locus of theological reflection that opens up dialogue without obscuring the identity of Christian faith.

### 3.2.1.4 Cosmic Harmony and Integral Ecology

The theme of cosmic harmony in the Marapu death ritual reflects a cosmological vision that situates the balance between the upper, middle, and lower worlds as the foundation of human order. This triadic structure is not merely symbolic, but carries an ontological dimension that affirms that human existence is always embedded in a dynamic relationship with the cosmos.<sup>79</sup> Such harmony also entails social and ecological implications, as maintaining cosmic balance corresponds to preserving both communal order and environmental integrity.<sup>80</sup> Within contemporary theological discourse, Pope Francis, in the

<sup>73</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*.116

<sup>74</sup> Panda, —Perjalanan Jiwa Ke ‘Kampung Leluhur’ Konsep Kematian Menurut Kepercayaan Asli Masyarakat Sumba (Marapu) Dan Perjumpaannya Dengan Ajaran Katolik.¶

<sup>75</sup> R. Hardawirjana, trans., *Konsili Vatikan II, Lumen Gentium, Konstitusi Dogmatis Tentang Gereja* (Jakarta: Obor, 1993).art. 49

<sup>76</sup> Daga, Toron, and Masneno, —Konsep Keselamatan Dalam Kepercayaan Marapu Dan Relevansinya Dengan Iman Katolik.¶

<sup>77</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.26-31

<sup>78</sup> Bevans.37-39

<sup>79</sup> Jorghia Margareta Salman, I Made Pageh, and Tuty Maryati, —Marapu: Sistem Ritual Kematian Pada Suku Loli, Kota Waikabubak, Kabupaten Sumba Barat, Provinsi NTT Dan Potensinya Sebagai Sumber Belajar Sejarah,¶ *Pendidikan Sejarah* 12, no. 3 (2024): 182–95.

<sup>80</sup> Gunawan, —Kerbau Untuk Leluhur: Dimensi Horizontal Dalam Ritus Kematian Pada Agama Merapu.¶

encyclical *Laudato Si'*, affirms that —everything is interconnected,<sup>81</sup> a principle that highlights the integral interrelation between humanity, nature, and God.

The resonance between Marapu cosmology and the concept of integral ecology is further strengthened by recent scholarly studies. Vivencio Ballano demonstrates that an anthropological approach to inculturation underscores the importance of reciprocal relations between humans, culture, and the environment as an inseparable unity,<sup>82</sup> while Felix Wilfred emphasizes that Asian theological reflection understands reality as a network of interdependent relations, in which humanity, nature, and the divine are dynamically interconnected.<sup>83</sup> This perspective affirms that local cosmologies such as Marapu are not only anthropologically relevant but also possess normative contributions to global ecological ethics.

Through the Translation Model, the symbolism of cosmic harmony is not eliminated, but rather transformed within the framework of Christian ecological theology.<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, inculturation becomes an integrative process that allows local symbols to enrich the Church's reflection, while also fostering the development of a theology that is contextually responsive and transformative in addressing the global ecological crisis.

### 3.2.1.5 Divine Hiddenness and Apophatic Theology

The theme of divine hiddenness in the expression *malla mama–pamama Marapu* reveals a profound religious awareness that God is a mystery surpassing the limits of human conceptualization. God is understood simultaneously as present and hidden, a paradox that reflects the existential experience of human beings in encountering transcendent reality. Within the apophatic theological tradition, this perspective affirms that hiddenness is not absence, but a mode of divine presence that transcends human language and concepts. Karl Rahner asserts that —God is always greater than any human concept of Him,<sup>85</sup> thus positioning the experience of mystery as the starting point of theological reflection.

Through a hermeneutical approach within the Translation Model, this notion of hiddenness can be interpreted as *semina Verbi*, namely the seeds of the Word already present within culture prior to explicit revelation. Stephen B. Bevans argues that faith is always embodied in diverse contextual expressions while ultimately pointing to the same divine mystery; consequently, local cultures may be understood as authentic loci of incarnational revelation.<sup>86</sup> In this sense, Marapu is not positioned as an opposition to Christian faith, but rather as a *locus theologicus* that opens possibilities for dialogue.

This approach is further reinforced by contemporary comparative theological studies. Felix Wilfred emphasizes that Asian theological reflection operates within a horizon of interreligious dialogue, where religious experience is understood as an encounter with the

<sup>81</sup> Paus Fransiskus, *Laudato Si'*, ed. F.X Adisusanto (Jakarta: Departemen Dokumentasi Dan Penerangan Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia, 2015).art. 91

<sup>82</sup> Ballano, —Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization.¶6-8

<sup>83</sup> Wilfred, —Asian Theological Ferment ( For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives ).¶

<sup>84</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.26-31

<sup>85</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*.22

<sup>86</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.37-39

divine mystery that cannot be confined to a single tradition.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, the divine hiddenness within Marapu can be understood as a hermeneutical space of encounter that enriches Catholic theology while expanding the horizon of faith dialogue in an inclusive, reflective, and non-reductionist manner.

### 3.2.2 Critical Evaluation: Avoiding Automatic Equivalence

A critical evaluation of the inculturation process highlights the danger of *automatic equivalence*, namely the tendency to directly equate cultural symbols with doctrines of faith without adequate theological analysis. In the Marapu context, the identification of *tillu-mannu* with the Trinity often emerges as a problematic simplification, since it —overlooks the ontological and epistemological differences between cultural symbols and divine revelation, as noted by Emanuel Martasudjita.<sup>88</sup> The symbol of *tillu-mannu* is rooted in the cosmology and social relations of the Sumbanese people, whereas the Trinity is a mystery of faith grounded in God's revelation within the history of salvation. Consequently, equating the two risks reducing the depth of their respective meanings and generating theological distortion.

Within this framework, the principle of *double fidelity* as developed by Stephen B. Bevans becomes an essential methodological criterion. This principle requires simultaneous fidelity to both the Gospel and culture, ensuring that inculturation does not fall into either syncretism or exclusivism. Fidelity to culture demands respect for symbols within their own horizon of meaning, while fidelity to the Gospel requires the preservation of the integrity of Christian revelation.<sup>89</sup>

As a hermeneutical alternative, the analogical approach offers a more productive middle way. Stephen B. Bevans argues that contextual theology always operates within a creative tension between fidelity to the faith and engagement with cultural contexts; therefore, the meaning of faith is not erased but expressed analogically in diverse cultural forms.<sup>90</sup> From this perspective, *tillu-mannu* can be understood as a symbol of cosmic harmony emphasizing the relationality of creation, whereas the Trinity represents the relational mystery within God. Both exhibit resonance in the dimension of relationality, yet they are not ontologically identical. Accordingly, inculturation is understood as a process of critical, reflective, and creative dialogue that preserves difference while opening possibilities for mutual theological enrichment.

### 3.2.3 Inculturative Contribution and Pastoral Implications

This study affirms that the Marapu death prayer can be understood as a *locus theologicus*, namely a concrete space in which human experience becomes a site of encounter with God. Within this framework, symbols, rituals, and local religious language are not merely objects of ethnographic inquiry, but legitimate sources of theological reflection. The principal contribution of this study lies in the methodological integration of empirical data and theological reflection in a systematic manner, thereby enabling a contextual reading of

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<sup>87</sup> Wilfred, —Asian Theological Ferment ( For Doing Theology in Contemporary Indonesia : Interdisciplinary Perspectives ).175-77

<sup>88</sup> Martasudjita, —Proses Inkulturasi Liturgi Di Indonesia.1

<sup>89</sup> Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.26-27

<sup>90</sup> Bevans.37-39

faith without losing its normative depth. This approach underscores that theology emerges through dialogue with concrete cultural contexts and human experience.<sup>91</sup>

The pastoral implications of these findings position the Church as a humble, reflective, and participatory partner in cultural dialogue. The Church is not called to replace local culture, but to interpret it in the light of the Gospel by discerning the signs of the times within the concrete context of people's lives.<sup>92</sup> In practice, the Marapu death ritual offers inspiration for the development of inculturated funeral liturgies, in which the meaning of death as both a cosmic and communal event can be integrated into Catholic worship. This may be realized through homilies and prayers rooted in the existential experience of the faithful, the prudent use of local symbols, and the strengthening of the communal dimension of faith, including relationships with the deceased in the light of the *communio sanctorum*.<sup>93</sup>

The process of inculturation also requires the active involvement of customary leaders and local figures as subjects of dialogue, thereby avoiding hegemonic approaches and opening space for shared interpretation. In this way, inculturation becomes a dialogical, reflective, and transformative pastoral praxis, enabling the Christian faith to take authentic root within local culture without losing its identity.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.2.4 Synthesis

Overall, the integration of empirical findings and theological reflection demonstrates that the Marapu death prayer constitutes a complex and meaningful religious expression. Through the Translation Model of Stephen B. Bevans, these symbols can be interpreted analogically as a space of dialogue between Catholic faith and local culture. Inculturation in this context is not a process of assimilation, but rather a —creative encounter that enables mutual enrichment (Bevans, 2002). Marapu symbols are thus respected within their original cosmological framework, while the Christian faith maintains the integrity of its revelation.

Accordingly, this process opens new horizons for the development of a more dialogical, reflective, and contextually relevant theology. Inculturation thus becomes not merely a theological strategy, but also a pastoral praxis that animates faith within the concrete realities of the community.

## 4. Conclusion

This study affirms that the Marapu death prayer constitutes a religious text containing a coherent theological structure of meaning and can be understood as a *locus theologicus* within the perspective of inculturated theology. The principal findings indicate that key symbols death, sacrifice, ancestral relations, cosmic harmony, and divine hiddenness reveal authentic religious intuitions concerning the human relationship with the Transcendent. Through the Translation Model, these intuitions can be interpreted analogically in the light of the Catholic faith without falling into *automatic equivalence*. Accordingly, the layered practices of the faithful do not represent a conflict of faith, but rather a dynamic and contextual process of inculturation.

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<sup>91</sup> Bevans.3-5

<sup>92</sup> R. Hardawirjana, trans., *Konsili Vatikan II, Gaudium et Spes, Konstitusi Pastoral Tentang Gereja Di Dunia Dewasa Ini* (Jakarta: Obor, 1993).art. 4

<sup>93</sup> Widyawati, Lon, and Midun, —Mission and Inculturation : Preserving Local Language and Culture in the Indonesian Church.14-6

<sup>94</sup> Ballano, —Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization.19-11

The contributions of this study are theoretical, methodological, and pastoral. Theoretically, it expands the concept of *locus theologicus* by positioning local ritual prayer as a legitimate source of theological reflection. Methodologically, it proposes an integration of ethnography and theological hermeneutics through the Translation Model. Pastorally, it provides a framework for an approach to inculturation that is dialogical, critical, and non-reductionist.

Nevertheless, this study has certain limitations, particularly in the limited scope of participants and the specificity of its geographical context. Furthermore, the approach employed tends to emphasize symbolic aspects and therefore does not fully capture the performative dimension of the ritual, while also remaining susceptible to potential interpretative bias on the part of the researcher.

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- Umu Setu Katadak, tokoh Marapu Kampung Adat Prai Au-Majaga, Sumba Tengah
- Vinsensius Reku Tibu, Pembina Umat dan Guru Agama ( PUGA) Stasi St. Petrus dan Paulus Lediwatu, Paroki St. Klemens Katiku Loku
- Yohanes Bili, Katekis Keuskupan Weetebula Sumba
- Yustina Nipu, Katekis Keuskupan Weetebula Sumba