



From Adaptation to Inculturation: The Catholic Mission and Dayak Culture in the Diocese of Palangka Raya, Central Kalimantan

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Abstract: This study explores the historical development, cultural engagement, and pastoral challenges of the Catholic mission in Central Kalimantan, from the arrival of Antonio Ventimiglia in the 17th century to the establishment of the Diocese of Palangka Raya in 1993. Using a literature review method, relevant academic, ecclesial, and historical sources published in the last two decades were thematically analyzed to identify missionary strategies, key contributors, and the interaction between Catholicism and Dayak culture. The findings show that while Catholicism has contributed significantly to transforming marriage customs, integrating Christian meaning into agricultural and life-cycle rituals, and improving economic organization through initiatives such as Credit Unions, the process of inculturation remains incomplete. Many Dayak Catholics retain elements of pre-Christian belief, particularly *Kaharingan* traditions and mystical practices such as *belian*. Limited pastoral resources and challenging geography hinder the deepening of catechesis and faith formation. The discussion highlights that authentic evangelization in this context requires moving beyond adaptation toward genuine inculturation, incorporating local symbols like *Batang Garing* into catechesis, and empowering local catechists and clergy through institutions such as STIPAS Tahasak Danum Pambelum. The study concludes that a culturally rooted and pastorally strategic approach is essential for Catholicism to be fully integrated into the life and identity of the Dayak people.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic mission's entry into the region of Central Kalimantan began through Banjarmasin. It originated from an agreement between the Portuguese and the Sultan of Banjarmasin around the year 1687, which allowed a Catholic priest to live and settle in Banjarmasin and to establish a church. On February 2, 1688, a priest from the Theatine Order named Antonio Ventimiglia arrived in the Banjarmasin area from Goa (India) aboard a Portuguese merchant ship (Widodo, 2016: 5).

Upon arriving in Banjarmasin, Ventimiglia established relations with the Dayak Ngaju people. After residing for some time in Banjarmasin, he traveled on to Macao. In fact, Ventimiglia wished to remain in Banjarmasin, but the Portuguese had not yet granted him permission. His desire to carry out missionary work on the island of Borneo was finally realized after he received approval from his superiors and the Portuguese authorities in Macao. On

January 18, 1689, he arrived in Banjarmasin from Macao aboard a Portuguese cargo ship. On that ship, Ventimiglia met a Dayak Ngaju man who had been a slave of the Portuguese and was returning to his homeland in Borneo. This encounter further strengthened Ventimiglia's resolve to carry out mission work in Banjarmasin and proclaim the Word of God to the Dayak people (Widodo, 2016: 7).

The indigenous inhabitants of Central Kalimantan are the Dayak people. Before the 15th century, it is believed that no other groups had come to live in Kalimantan apart from the Dayaks. The Dayaks lived along the banks of large and small rivers. The Dayak people of Central Kalimantan consist of the Ngaju, Maanyan, and Ot Danum groups, as well as several smaller groups such as the Lawangan, Taboyan, Dusun Siang, Boyan, Bantian, and Kodorin. Over time, as the world developed, Kalimantan received migrants from various ethnic groups who came to earn a living or settle in Central Kalimantan.

After some time in Banjarmasin, Ventimiglia traveled into the interior of Kalimantan together with the Dayak man he had met on the ship. They traveled by boat—equipped with an altar for celebrating the Holy Mass—along the Barito River and reached the upper Kapuas River. Along the way, Ventimiglia built relationships with the local indigenous people, including community leaders.

It is reported that his relationship with the local people was so strong that Ventimiglia baptized more than 3,000 Dayak people into the Catholic faith. He was also fluent in the Dayak language and highly respected their native culture. According to historical estimates, Ventimiglia's work took place in Manusup, a village located on the banks of the Kapuas River in the Kapuas Regency. His closeness with the Dayak people displeased the Sultan of Banjarmasin, as the Sultan was having problems with the Dayaks—problems which were worsened by Ventimiglia's good rapport with them. Moreover, the Sultan did not want his influence among the Dayaks to diminish because of Ventimiglia's presence (Widodo, 2016: 7).

For economic and political reasons related to the Sultan, the Portuguese authorities in Banjarmasin also disapproved of Ventimiglia's work in the interior. Therefore, the Sultan summoned him for questioning and to seek cooperation. Knowing the true intent of the summons, Ventimiglia ignored it. In 1691, he died. Many theories exist regarding his death, but the most dominant opinion is that he was killed by agents of the Sultan of Banjarmasin.

After Ventimiglia's death, the newly baptized Catholics became disoriented and gradually returned to their former beliefs and cultural practices. This is understandable since their knowledge of the faith was not yet deep. According to historical research, one of the remnants of Catholic teaching that remained in Dayak culture was the sign of the Cross. Over time, the Dayak Ngaju adapted this into a carved cross called *Rajah*, which they believed had the power to ward off evil spirits and prevent misfortune. Efforts to continue Ventimiglia's mission in Central Kalimantan were repeatedly attempted by his fellow missionaries but were always hindered, as the Sultan of Banjarmasin never allowed missionaries into the interior (Widodo, 2016: 8).

In its later development, Ventimiglia's mission evolved into what is now the Diocese of Palangka Raya. Today, the Church (the Diocese of Palangka Raya) faces the reality that even though many Dayaks embrace the Catholic faith, they still hold beliefs in mystical powers. For example, some Catholics still believe in the power of charms. In other words, Catholicism is for some only a status on their ID card, while their faith is shallow. There is a tendency to focus on outward expressions of religious practice rather than interior conversion. This situation is worsened by the shortage of pastoral workers in the Diocese of Palangka Raya, resulting in limited catechesis and understanding of the Catholic faith among the faithful.

This reality shows that many live their faith superficially, being content with external appearances and expressions without deep reflection on what they believe. As a result, personal commitment to the values of faith becomes shallow and threatened. This can be seen in the overall quality of the faithful's relationship with God and with the Church.

METHOD

This scientific article employs a literature review design to explore the mission in the Diocese of Palangka Raya. The approach begins by formulating research questions that include identifying the primary focus of the mission, tracing the development of missionary activities, and examining the significant contributions of key figures within the diocese.

The criteria for selecting literature include the relevance of the topic to the context of the Diocese of Palangka Raya, recognition of sources such as academic journals, books, and diocesan documents, as well as publications from the past two decades to obtain the most up-to-date perspectives. The literature search was conducted through official religious sources using keywords such as "mission of the Diocese of Palangka Raya," "missionary activities," and "diocesan development."

Articles were selected based on their relevance and quality, then subjected to in-depth analysis. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach to identify themes and subthemes, such as mission strategies, social and spiritual impacts, and the challenges encountered. The literature was categorized according to time periods and specific contexts within the Diocese of Palangka Raya. The synthesis of findings was presented in a coherent narrative to identify trends, major contributions, and research gaps.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Since the 17th century, Central Kalimantan was under the authority of the Banjarmasin government. The Banjar Sultanate at that time developed a complex governmental structure, with power held by the Sultan, making it a dominant force on the island of Borneo. The indigenous inhabitants of Borneo were the Dayak people, who lived in small groups in the island's interior.

Between 1880 and 1890, for political and trade reasons, the Dutch constructed canals connecting the Kapuas, Barito, and Kahayan rivers, with the aim of improving river transportation and communication from rural areas to the southeastern tip of Kalimantan. By

the late 19th century, according to Dutch records, administrative regions existed in Central Kalimantan, which were still incorporated into South Kalimantan—namely the Kapuas-Barito region and the Kotawaringin Sultanate.

At the local level, the Dutch colonial administration applied a traditional governance system, utilizing local traditional leaders to enforce laws, especially those related to taxation. They also exploited the local population as free labor or in forced labor (*kerja rodi*) for colonial projects such as building roads and tunnels. Along each rural river, several *Damang* served as leaders over multiple villages along their respective river systems. Each *Damang* had village representatives called *Pambakal*, who carried out delegated authority from the colonial administration to lead the local community.

The establishment of Central Kalimantan as a Level I Province was officially recognized as the 17th province of Indonesia. On 17 July 1957, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia laid the cornerstone marking the location and name of the provincial capital: Palangka Raya, meaning “a sacred, noble, and great place.” Initially, the provincial government was temporarily based in Banjarmasin. On 1 January 1958, in accordance with Ministry of Home Affairs Decree No. Up.34/41/24 dated 24 December 1956, the provincial government offices were officially relocated from Banjarmasin to Palangka Raya.

In the early 20th century (1907), the Catholic mission began to grow again—initially in East Kalimantan—through the work of the Capuchin Order and the Missionaries of the Holy Family (MSF). Over time, and through a long process, these religious orders expanded their mission into Central Kalimantan, where it developed in both quantity and quality, reaching deep into the interior.

Seeing this progress, Bishop F.X. Prajasuta, MSF of the Diocese of Banjarmasin proposed the division of his diocese into two: the Diocese of Palangka Raya and the Diocese of Banjarmasin. On 14 November 1992, he sent an official request to the Holy See. On 14 April 1993, the Holy See approved the request and formally established the Diocese of Palangka Raya—covering the territory of Central Kalimantan Province—appointing Mgr. Julius Aloysius Husin, MSF as its first bishop. He was consecrated in Palangka Raya on 17 October 1993.

Under Bishop Husin’s leadership, the new diocese began to gradually strengthen its pastoral structures. To this end, he invited pastoral workers, representatives of religious communities, and lay leaders to participate in the first diocesan working meeting from 4–8 October 1994. At that time, many participants traveled via rivers, requiring long and difficult journeys to reach Palangka Raya. The meeting was successfully held despite these challenges. However, just five days later, on 13 October 1994, Bishop Husin passed away at the age of 57.

After a lengthy vacancy, on Wednesday, 14 February 2001, the diocese received a new bishop, Mgr. Aloysius M. Sutrisnaatmaka, MSF, who was consecrated on 7 May 2001 at the Palangka Raya Cathedral, and who continues to serve as bishop to this day (Widodo, 2016: 11).

Kaharingan is the indigenous belief system of Central Kalimantan, practiced only in this region, and later incorporated into Hinduism for official recognition. Followers of Hindu Kaharingan are primarily found in the upstream regions of the Kahayan, Katingan, and other rivers. According to Kaharingan belief, noble living is achieved by following the *jalan adat* (customary way), which embodies moral norms and codes of conduct governing human relationships (Atmaka, 2011: 67).

Many Dayak people in the interior of Central Kalimantan still adhere to this belief, performing rituals to honor ancestral spirits. The highest deity is called Ranying Hatala (God). Kaharingan cosmology features a tree of life called *Batang Garing* or *Batang Haring*, shaped like an upward-pointing spearhead symbolizing life's source in Ranying Hatala. The tree has branches, each bearing three fruits pointing upward and downward, representing the three great human lineages descended from Maharaja Sangiang, Maharaja Sangen, and Maharaja Bunu. Its leaves represent the hornbill, the emblem of the Dayak people, while at its base is a jar (*guci*) containing holy water, symbolizing the underworld.

In Dayak belief, *Batang Garing* unites the three realms: the upper world (the abode of Ranying Hatala), the middle world (human habitation), and the underworld (realm of spirits). It represents harmony between humans, nature, fellow humans, and God. The spearhead pointing upward signifies reverence to Ranying Hatala as the source and sustainer of life. This sacred cosmological symbol also serves as the identity of the Dayak people and is present in rituals that express the human origin, existence, and destiny.

Another prominent symbol is the *Rajah*, often drawn at the entrance of houses or on support pillars, believed to offer spiritual protection. Understanding such local cultural and religious symbols provides an important entry point for proclaiming the Gospel, enabling missionaries to communicate God's Word in ways that resonate with the people. Therefore, evangelizers must be prepared to study local philosophy, analyze it philosophically, and interpret it biblically so that the people feel addressed by the message of the Gospel.

Religious ceremonies in Kaharingan reflect their beliefs and are embodied in attitudes and behaviors shaped by *jalan adat*. Following *adat* ensures noble living because it is believed to have been given by Ranying Hatala, the Creator, to the first human couple, Tunggal Garing Janjahunan Laut (male) and Kahukup Bangking Garing (female) (Widodo, 2016, p. 20). From them was passed down the *jalan adat*, the ancestral way of life of the Dayak Ngaju, preserved to the present day.

For the Dayak Ngaju, *adat*—a hereditary system of customs covering all aspects of life such as dress, manners, respect for elders, marriage rites, agricultural rituals, harvest celebrations, and funeral ceremonies—is sacred. It is considered a manifestation of the Creator's will and must be carefully preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. To safeguard *adat*, the Dayak Ngaju have customary leaders known as *Damang*, who hold respected positions in the community, with authority to enforce, protect, and maintain *adat* against violations, applying sanctions in accordance with customary law.

So far, there have been no clear signs of a genuine process of inculturation. Efforts undertaken have remained at the level of adaptation—that is, adjusting Catholic faith to the existing culture in Central Kalimantan—without yet reaching the stage where the faith truly permeates the cultural life of the Dayak Catholic community. Inculturation would mean that the Catholic faith has been fully accepted and has become an integral part of the life of Dayak Catholics, inseparable from the dynamics of their daily existence. In other words, Catholicism would no longer be seen as a foreign religion brought from outside but as something belonging to and enriching the identity of Dayak Catholics in Central Kalimantan. This is a mission that must continue to be pursued by the Church both as an institution and as a community of believers in Christ (Widodo, 2016: 20).

Such a situation is caused by various factors: the limited availability of written sources, as well as the lack of maximal effort to realize this vision. While certain initiatives have borne fruit, continuous work is needed so that the presence of Catholic faith in Central Kalimantan will be truly inseparable from the life of its people—not as a “guest” but as a “host.”

Although many Dayaks have embraced Catholicism, their understanding and practice of faith remain minimal or shallow in the sense that their faith is not yet deeply rooted. Mystical practices are still commonly found among Dayak Catholics. One example is *belian*, a traditional healing ritual. In this practice, illness is not viewed from a medical perspective but as the result of displeased ancestral spirits due to neglected rituals. Healing therefore requires performing a series of prescribed *belian* rites to restore the person’s health.

The weakness in faith formation is also due to the shortage of pastoral workers serving a widely dispersed population, as well as cultural factors. Becoming Catholic means surrendering one’s heart entirely to Catholic teaching—something that can be challenging for the Dayak people. Even after embracing Catholicism, many still rely on mystical powers, such as amulets (*jimat*), for protection. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church’s presence has begun to influence Dayak culture.

First, in the area of marriage: prior to Catholic influence, “contract marriages” were common, as were marriages between cousins. After encountering Catholic teaching, these customs have gradually disappeared. People began to value the noble meaning of marriage as taught by the Church. As a result, traditional wedding ceremonies are no longer regarded as determining the validity of marriage but are seen merely as complementary cultural observances (Widodo, 2011: 18).

Second, life events and activities—such as childbirth, rice planting (*menugal*), and others—are now more often associated with God’s role, expressed through Church liturgies.

Third, household economic management has improved. People are not only focused on daily survival but also on planning for the future. The establishment of Credit Unions (CU), initiated by the Catholic Church, is a concrete contribution to improving the economic management of Dayak communities in Central Kalimantan (Widodo, 2011: 20).

While the Diocese of Palangka Raya faces challenges related to the faith life of its members, it also must address other pressing concerns. To respond to issues of faith formation, the

Diocese has provided catechesis to deepen the faith of the local community. As part of this effort, the diocese established *Sekolah Tinggi Pastoral (STIPAS) Tahasak Danum Pabelum* as an educational institution for training future catechists, and the “Rex Pacis” Minor Seminary for the formation of future priests.

The hope is that through these institutions, catechists and priests serving in the Diocese of Palangka Raya will be able to carry out catechesis that meets the needs of the times and resonates with the local culture. Through catechesis and sound teaching, it is expected that the faithful will gain renewed enthusiasm for deepening their faith, so that Catholicism truly flows within the lives of the people of the Diocese of Palangka Raya. The Church will continue to act as a mother who constantly gives birth and nurtures her children through various pastoral activities. Based on these challenges, the theme of this study is the Church’s response to the development of the faith life of its members.

CONCLUSION

The history of the Catholic mission in Central Kalimantan, from the early work of Antonio Ventimiglia in the 17th century to the establishment of the Diocese of Palangka Raya in 1993, reflects both the resilience of missionary efforts and the complexity of engaging with the Dayak cultural context. While the Church has made significant contributions in education, pastoral care, and socio-economic development, the process of inculturation remains incomplete. The Catholic faith is still often perceived as an external tradition rather than a fully integrated element of Dayak identity and daily life.

Several factors contribute to this slow integration, including limited pastoral resources, geographical challenges, and the enduring influence of pre-Christian beliefs such as *Kaharingan* rituals and mystical practices like *belian*. While many Dayaks have embraced Catholicism, aspects of traditional belief remain deeply embedded in their worldview. This duality presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the Church to engage in deeper catechesis, spiritual formation, and culturally sensitive evangelization that bridges the gap between faith and culture.

Going forward, the mission in Central Kalimantan requires a sustained commitment to authentic inculturation—moving beyond adaptation to a genuine synthesis of Catholic faith and Dayak culture. This involves empowering local catechists and clergy through institutions such as STIPAS Tahasak Danum Pabelum and the Rex Pacis Minor Seminary, fostering liturgical expressions that resonate with local traditions, and strengthening the faithful’s understanding of the Gospel as a source of life, hope, and communal identity. Only through such a holistic approach can Catholicism in Central Kalimantan move from being perceived as a “guest” to being fully embraced as a “home” within the heart of the Dayak people.

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