



Bridging Cultures: *Debata Na Tolu* as Analogia Entis in the Inculturation of Understanding on Divinity

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Abstract: The Catholic Church, in its development, enriched itself with language. Language becomes an entry point for the Church to provide understanding to its congregation. The Church encountered challenges when it was struggling to articulate its teachings in accordance with the context of the society it faced. This study aimed to explore this challenge. It sought to investigate what was meant by *Debata Na Tolu* in the understanding of the *Batak Toba* people. This understanding was then viewed through the lens of Catholic teachings about the Trinity. The reason for conducting this study was to help Catholic congregants who were still deeply rooted in the *Batak* language to understand the teachings of faith in a language that was familiar to them. This study contributed to the inculturation of language that embodied Catholic thought while employing the *Batak Toba* way of understanding *Debata Na Tolu*. This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic method and critical readings of earlier *Batak* writings that discussed *Debata Na Tolu*, as well as sections 249-267 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church to provide a Catholic understanding of the Trinity. The findings suggested that linguistic analogies could be used as a means to convey the truth of faith, particularly in relation to the teachings of the Trinity, into the language of *Debata Na Tolu*, while still respecting the applicable boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church emerged and developed in Indonesia starting in the 16th century. Before that time, Indonesian society was not familiar with Catholic teachings. During that period, Indonesian communities established a relationship with the Creator through their own means. Their ways of connecting with the Creator were influenced by their respective cultures. These cultures and beliefs varied from one region to another, resulting in each area having its own rich thought when discussing the Creator.

The Catholic Church already possessed a very rich conceptual understanding of God the Creator before arriving in Indonesia. This wealth of understanding developed over a long period. It was also shaped in response to situational challenges to strengthen the faith of the community. Significant councils emerged to reaffirm the faith of the people and to clarify who Jesus Christ is. There were also Church documents that addressed the challenges of the times. The Catholic Church, with its continually renewed understanding, always strives to communicate this faith so that believers can understand their faith better (Firmanto, 2015).

When the Catholic Church arrives in a new territory, all its teachings and understandings of faith encounter new challenges. The Catholic Church faces people who

already have their own understanding of the Creator according to the culture they have inherited. The Church needs an entry point to engage in dialogue with that community. In this situation, the Catholic Church requires a new language to discuss its teachings in a way that can be well understood by the people. This is done to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and values between Catholic understanding and local cultural understanding (Firmanto & Setiyaningtiyas, 2017).

The Trinity is the term used by the Catholic Church to denote the unity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. When this language encounters the *Batak Toba* community, it is not immediately understood. On the other hand, the *Batak Toba* people, in their religious understanding, refer to the Creator as *Mulajadi Na Bolon*. This *Mulajadi Na Bolon* is personified as *Debata Na Tolu* (God in Three Deities). In terms of numbers, both the Catholic and *Batak Toba* beliefs have three entities. Given this similarity, do the Catholic Church and *Batak Toba* culture share a common understanding of the Trinity? Can the Trinity and *Debata Na Tolu* be equated without distinction? What are the boundaries and opportunities that can be utilized for the Church to develop a new language when discussing the Trinity with the *Batak Toba* community? These are the questions this study aims to address.

The purpose of this study is to provide a new hermeneutic when discussing the Trinity with the *Batak Toba* community. This study seeks to explain Catholic theology using language that resonates with *Batak Toba* culture. It does so by offering language, parables, or new illustrations about *Debata Na Tolu* with the characteristics of the Catholic Church. While the language of *Debata Na Tolu* cannot express all the dogmas contained within the Trinity, the Catholic Church has an understanding of inculturation. Inculturation is an effort or pathway used for dialogue between the Gospel and culture (Martasudjita, 2022). This inculturation is applied to understand the Trinity in the *Batak Toba* language of *Debata Na Tolu*.

The urgency of this study arises from the fact that Catholics are deeply rooted in their cultural nuances in the *Batak* region (Sitorus et al., 2021; Tinambunan, 2023). Regional languages are still widely used in Church celebrations. Given this situation, this study serves as a means to articulate the mystery of the Trinity in Catholic teaching using the language they know, which is *Debata Na Tolu*. Through this approach, the space to discuss the mystery of the Trinity within the understanding of the *Batak* people becomes accessible for them to comprehend in accordance with their cultural context.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic research method. The focus of this study is to explore the understanding of *Debata Na Tolu*. The research is conducted through a critical reading of previous studies and texts that discuss *Debata Na Tolu*. After this critical reading, the study continues by examining the Catholic theological understanding of the Trinity. This understanding of the Trinity is drawn from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) nos. 249-267, which specifically addresses the Trinity. The CCC serves as a source because it is a manual designed to assist in understanding the content of the Catholic faith. After these two

aspects are addressed, the study proceeds to demonstrate two things. First, the study shows what new language the Catholic Church can use as an entry point to explain the Trinity to the *Batak Toba* community. Second, it identifies the boundaries that need to be considered so that the understanding of the Trinity does not deviate significantly when using the language of *Debata Na Tolu*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Mulajadi is a special term or title that the *Batak Toba* community uses to refer to the Creator. *Mulajadi* consists of two words: "mula" and "jadi." The word *mula* means beginning, while the word *jadi* means "to become, to make something exist, (to create)" (Sinaga, 1981). The word "jadi" originates from the active intransitive verb "manjadi." Thus, the term *Mulajadi* can be interpreted as "the Initiator" of all that is created or "the Initiator" of genesis (Sinaga, 2004). Some also interpret *Mulajadi Na Bolon* as the primary and foremost creator (Pandiangan, 1993).

In *Mulajadi Na Bolon*, the word "mula" is combined with the word "jadi." It has been mentioned above that the word "jadi" comes from the active intransitive verb "manjadi." To understand the word "manjadi," we can refer to this quotation (Hoetagaloe, 1926):

"Ibana do manjadihon nasa na adong; jala ndang adong nanggo sada sian angka na adong i, na so marmula sian ibana... boi do tarjadihonsa manang aha na naeng patupaonna holan marhitehite hatana sambing."

From this quotation, it can be seen that the word "manjadi" seeks to indicate that the Creator is the source of everything. Everything in this world originates from the Creator. The Creator is even capable of bringing something that does not exist into existence. The Creator has the ability to create anything He wishes simply by speaking. After the word "*Mulajadi*," there is the word "Na." The word "na" is a connecting word that means "who" or "that." This word connects "*Mulajadi*" with "*Bolon*." The word "*Bolon*" itself means great or magnificent. Thus, *Mulajadi Na Bolon* is a name that signifies the great primary and foremost creator. Everything, even the three worlds believed in by the *Batak* people, was created by *Mulajadi Na Bolon* (Angerler, 2016).

Debata Na Tolu can be described as the personification or representation of *Mulajadi Na Bolon*. The perfection of the omnipotence of *Mulajadi Na Bolon* can be understood through this personification. Each personification has its own duties or abilities. The special abilities of each personification serve as a simple illustration of the perfect abilities of *Mulajadi Na Bolon*, which are divided into smaller parts. These smaller parts do not diminish the perfection of the abilities of *Mulajadi Na Bolon*, but rather clarify those abilities further.

There are two opinions regarding the creation of *Debata Na Tolu* (Sinaga, 1981). First, *Debata Na Tolu* was directly created by *Mulajadi Na Bolon*. Second, *Debata Na Tolu* was created by *Mulajadi Na Bolon* through the intermediary of a mythical bird in the *banua ginjang* known as the *Hulambu Jati*. Both methods of creation do not need to be debated, as both indicate that *Debata Na Tolu* was created by *Mulajadi Na Bolon* in His own way.

The depiction of *Batara Guru* can be seen in a story that mentions him. The opinion states as follows (Parkin, 1978):

“...*Debata Na Tolu*. The one is called: *Batara Guru* is power, *Batara Guru* is light, *Batara Guru* where to get, *Batara Guru* where to ask, a place to get all hope, a place to ask questions about the law; who opens traps, who releases what can be caught, who takes what is left, who reminds the forgetful...”

From this opinion, several characteristics of *Batara Guru* can be seen. *Batara Guru* is a deity who is a source of creative power (Sinaga, 2004). *Batara Guru* is a deity who serves as a source of law, making him a place to inquire about laws. In addition to laws, *Batara Guru* is also a source of knowledge and customs (Pandiangan, 1993). Customs themselves are the cornerstone of life for the *Batak Toba* community. Therefore, if a *Batak* person behaves inappropriately, they are referred to as *halak na so maradat*, which can be translated as "a person who does not know the customs." *Batak* people often use the term "adat" more than "etiquette." This indicates that customs represent an order. Thus, *Batara Guru* as the source of customs refers to the deity that is the source of the order of life (Pandiangan, 1993). Through *Batara Guru*, we can see how *Mulajadi Na Bolon*, as the creative source, becomes the foundation for the collective life of humans. *Batara Guru* symbolizes a wise leader (Silalahi, 2012).

Like the god *Batara Guru*, an explanation of the god *Soripada* is also found in the story of the birth of these three gods. The explanation of *Soripada* is as follows (Tobing, 1956):

“...Hubahen ma goarmu Tuan Sorimangaradja (*Soripada*), Sori so haliapan, Sori so halipurpuran; *Soripada* mamuro, *Soripada* marorot. Asa buroi songon hauma, parorot songon posoposo, ingani ma songon huta, parmahan ma songon horbo. *Soripada* di djae, *Soripada* di djulu...”

In this story, it is depicted that *Soripada* is the god who protects plants, watches over children, and acts as a shepherd for humanity (Naibaho, 2023). *Soripada* is the god who exists from the north to the south. This depiction is similar to other stories that portray *Soripada* as a protector, *Soripada sakti*, who never intimidates and cannot be intimidated, and will not deceive people (Parkin, 1978). This illustrates that *Soripada* is a god who indicates that *Mulajadi Na Bolon* is a caring creator. It also shows that *Soripada* is a god who has the power to sustain life (Sinaga, 2004).

About *Mangalabulan*, it is told that

“...Hubahen ma goarmu: Tuan di Papantinggi, *Debata Mangalabulan*... *Malabulan* so habolonan, mula ni atalatal, mula ni utulutul, mula nit ahi gear, mula ni tahi mussuon...” (Tobing, 1956).

This story shows that the god *Mangalabulan* is the source of health, a good life, and long life. However, this god is also a source of quarrels and wars. The god *Mangalabulan* becomes a deity that maintains both good and evil. The god *Mangalabulan* has the power to uphold justice and to regulate rainfall and fertility (Pandiangan, 1993). Therefore, the god *Mangalabulan* is called a god with renewing power that enables creation to grow and age (Sinaga, 2004). As a god who is the source of health, *Mangalabulan* possesses capabilities that correspond to this.

Mangalabulan is the god responsible for providing illumination and prophecy (*panurirangon*), healing (*hadatuon*), and strength (*hagagoon*) to humanity (Gultom, 2010).

In the CCC (the Catechism of the Catholic Church), the discussion about the Trinity is found in numbers 249-267. The Holy Trinity is a fundamental aspect of the Catholic faith expressed in the creed and formulated in the Church's sermons, catechesis, and prayers (CCC no. 249). The doctrine of the Trinity has undergone a long process in its formulation. Understanding the Trinity is supported by the results of various councils, the theological understandings taught by the Church Fathers, and the awareness of the Christian community. Therefore, the term Trinity is not found in Scripture, but due to the impact felt by the Church, it seeks to articulate it (Bala, 2016).

The Trinity is one. The Catholic faith acknowledges that God remains one and not three. Within that unity, there are three persons, a Trinity of the same essence. The one God is not divided into the three persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of them remains the full and complete God (CCC no. 253). However, the three Divine Persons are really distinct from one another (Bala, 2020). When viewed from their relational origins, the three have differences. These differences, when seen from their relational origins, are that the Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Holy Spirit is breathed forth (CCC no. 254). This distinction does not divide the divine unity among the three. This distinction only applies to the reciprocal relationships that occur. The CCC quotes what St. Gregory of Nazianzus stated: "One divinity without inequality according to substance or essence, without a higher degree that elevates or a lower degree that diminishes... that is the common essence that is infinite of the Three who are infinite. God wholly, each viewed in himself... God as the three viewed together... Just as I began to contemplate unity, the Trinity appeared already in its glory. Just as I began to contemplate the Trinity, I was immediately dazzled by unity."

The Trinity is one and the same also in the divine works. In this unity, the divine works are seen as activities performed as one and the same (Jie, 2022). In this single activity, the Trinity continues to carry out that work together according to the uniqueness of each Person (CCC no. 258). Based on 1 Cor 8:6, the Church acknowledges one God and Father from whom all things come, one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist, and one Holy Spirit, in whom all things exist. With and in these Three Persons, Christians engage in fellowship. Whoever worships the Father does so through the Son and the Holy Spirit; whoever follows Christ does so because the Father draws them and the Spirit moves them (CCC no. 259).

After observing Catholic theology speaking about the Trinity, one thing that must be genuinely understood is that the mystery of the Holy Trinity is the central secret of faith and Christian life. Only God can reveal this mystery to humanity, by revealing Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (CCC no. 261). Although the Catholic Church has a formulation that speaks of the Trinity, this formulation is not a rigid formula that can accurately depict the Trinity. This formulation arises from the journey of the faith experiences of believers toward God, and it provides only a limited portrayal of the Trinity itself. With this limited

understanding, humanity is already assisted in believing and understanding the one, good, and powerful God (Magnis-Suseno, 2019).

The formulation about the Trinity can help humans understand their God. Language becomes the way for people to comprehend. Therefore, hermeneutics plays a role in helping individuals understand their faith. The term hermeneutics comes from the Greek word *hermeneuein*, which means to translate or act as a translator (Hardiman, 2015). Hermeneutics becomes a bridge to share the "author's intent of the text" to the reader along with their "interpretation" (Fanggidae & Paongan, 2020). Therefore, this writing uses hermeneutics to explain the Trinity according to the Catholic faith to Catholics in the *Batak* land who understand the *Batak* language.

Hermeneutics, because it involves understanding and interpretation, can be used as a tool to discuss something with a particular culture (Munir, 2021). As a tool, there must be certain benchmarks that need to be observed to ensure that the interpretation does not deviate significantly from the original intent (Purba, 2018). In this realm, the understanding of the Trinity will be packaged in the inculturation of the *Batak Toba* language. The understanding of the Trinity is articulated in the language of *Debata na Tolu* with certain boundaries. With this, the space for new theology opens up because a new language is found for working (Manik et al., 2020).

The Trinity in *Debata na Tolu* is expressed in the language of analogy. Analogy is used because it can provide a similar atmosphere in some respects while also highlighting its differences (Riyanto, 2018). This analogical hermeneutics aims to provide a nuance and Catholic understanding in the language of *Debata na Tolu*, which is comprehensible to the *Batak Toba* people. This language allows the Trinity to be understood in the context of *Debata na Tolu* while still respecting existing boundaries. Thus, *Debata na Tolu*, when in the context of Catholic believers and Catholic teaching, can be understood in accordance with Catholic doctrine but in a language familiar to them.

The Trinity is one because of its divinity but distinct because of the roles of each. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father, but the Three are God (Magnis-Suseno, 2019). In *Debata na Tolu*, *Batara Guru*, *Soripada*, and *Mangalabulan* also each have their distinct roles. *Debata na Tolu* has specific tasks that reflect the power of *Mulajadi na Bolon*. *Batara Guru* displays creative power in forming the order of life, *Soripada* reveals the power of love and care in life, and *Mangalabulan* illustrates the power of guidance toward the right path. Within the *Debata na Tolu* is the person of *Mulajadi na Bolon* revealed. The same can be seen in the Trinity. When speaking of the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, God can still be understood. Because of this similarity, the analogical language of *Debata na Tolu* can be used to provide understanding to *Batak Toba* Catholics about the Trinity.

One thing to be noted is the boundaries that exist when discussing the Trinity in the analogy of *Debata na Tolu*. The Trinity is one and not separable, although it can be distinguished (Bala, 2020). There are no hierarchies where one is lower than the others. Their

status is the same. This is different from *Debata na Tolu*. *Debata na Tolu* indeed represents *Mulajadi na Bolon* in the uniqueness they possess, but their degrees are not the same. As previously stated, *Debata na Tolu* was created by *Mulajadi na Bolon* Himself. *Debata na Tolu* is different from other creations because they have advantages in uniqueness that other creations do not possess. This limitation needs to be considered when using *Debata na Tolu* as an analogy for the Holy Trinity in the context of the *Batak Toba* Catholic community.

CONCLUSION

Throughout time and the experience of faith, the Church attempts to provide language to speak about the Holy Trinity to the faithful. In understanding this language, the Holy Trinity is tried to be understood from the perspective of the *Batak Toba* people through *Debata na Tolu*. *Debata na Tolu*, as understood by the *Batak Toba* Catholic community, becomes an analogical language that can be used to discuss the Holy Trinity in Catholic thought. The analogical language serves as a medium because there are similarities that arise when speaking about the Holy Trinity in the language of *Debata na Tolu*. The analogical language also serves as a reminder of the boundaries that must be respected to avoid deviating from the intended meaning when the Holy Trinity is articulated in *Debata na Tolu*. With this analogical language, the mystery of the Holy Trinity finds an inculturated expression among the *Batak Toba* people through *Debata na Tolu*.

The suggestion found in this study is that this writing still revolves around language alone. Therefore, the practice of faith itself could receive special attention. In the experience of practicing faith, the richness of language is obtained. In the practice of faith, the wealth for understanding the mystery of God is found. It is through the practice of faith that new ways for the people to comprehend their faith are discovered.

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