



Interpreting the Sacred: Christian Faith and *Dayak Uud Danum* Cultural Theology

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Abstract: The focus of this article was to critically analyze the concept of the Divine in the *Dayak Uud* culture and to compare it with the Divine in the teachings of the Catholic Church. Every culture had religious values that could contribute to theology. In this context, the *Uud Danum Dayak* tribe had a divine concept called *Jahtah Mohotarak*. *Jahtah Mohotarak* was God in the concept of the *Uud Danum Dayak* people, who gave life and fertility to every creature on earth. This writing methodology was carried out in the form of qualitative research by searching for data through journals, books, and online articles related to the *Uud Danum Dayak* tribe and the Transcendent Concept in local culture. This data was compared with the teachings of the Catholic Church about the Divine. The results of this study obtained data about how the *Uud Danum Dayak* community respected God himself in their daily lives by not calling Him carelessly. At the same time, the religious values of the *Dayak Uud Danum* community regarding the Divine became relevant pastoral tools in the contextualization of theology.

INTRODUCTION

Every culture certainly has a concept of the transcendent as a form of respect for the Divine. This concept will also influence how local communities build values and ways of faith (Sasana, 2022; Ceria et al., 2022; Damianus, 2020; Gegel, 2019). As pastoral actors, local culture becomes a good medium for doing contextual theology, where the pastoral subject can place Christian values that correspond with the existing culture. We know that culture is largely determined by history but is also shaped by nature and the environment (KWI, 1996). At this point, the Church sees that God plays an important role in human life. However, at the same time, culture is formed through human activities, whether in the past, present, or future, and these activities connect the relationships between humans. The role of God involved in human life becomes very important for historical humans, so that they continuously confront themselves, which is born and developed within cultural ties.

In this context, in the culture of the *Dayak Uud Danum* people, the way to express faith values to the Divine is by referring to it as *Jahtah Mohotarak*. For the *Dayak Uud Danum* people, the concept of *Jahtah Mohotarak* is God Himself who gives life to humans both while they are on earth and in the afterlife. There is a highest reality that needs to be honored, a reality that exists in the “upper world” that has an important role in human life. However, this reality does not merely play a role in human life but also builds a deep relationship with humans. This

means there is an inherent pilgrimage space between humans and the highest reality itself (Riyanto, 2018).

The issue is that the divine concept in *Dayak Uud Danum* culture also has dualism. This means that this concept cannot be fully understood as divine because it can also lead to deities. However, when viewed from its historical context, the *Dayak Uud Danum* tribe originated from the Yunnan province of China (Firmino, 2018), which has a background of belief in deities. Therefore, in this writing, the author proposes two status quos as follows: a. What is the Divine in *Dayak Uud Danum* culture? How can Christian values be built within *Dayak Uud Danum* culture? These questions are important for doing contextual and relevant theology.

As previously explained, this study has also been examined by several authors. Trio Kurniawan showed that the transcendent concept in *Dayak Uud Danum* culture has a complex relationship between the Divine and humans, as well as between humans, manifested through sacred traditions and rituals (Kurniawan, 2019). The same perspective is also seen by Siong, Armada, and Adon in viewing the divine in *Dayak Barai* culture, which is ethnically related to *Dayak Uud Danum*. They show that in every culture, there is always a highest reality that influences the way of life of the community (Siong et al., 2021). In this regard, the Church also views that the human pilgrimage living in culture has an inseparable relationship with the Divine (KWI, 1996). God manifests Himself in culture so that humans can realize God's important role in relational human life.

METHOD

In writing this article, the author used qualitative research methods. The author sought data from journals and books related to *Dayak Uud Danum* culture and the concept of the Divine in the Christian faith of the Catholic Church. This data will be analyzed into current studies as a relevant and contemporary pastoral contribution to the local culture. The data is analyzed using content analysis methods. This analysis will yield research findings that will construct an understanding of the concept of the Divine in *Dayak Uud Danum* culture and the contextual proclamation of the Christian faith. The discussion of these findings will serve as a contextual pastoral study as a contribution to the proclamation of the good news.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Uud Danum is the name of a sub-tribe of the *Dayak* people residing in West and Central Kalimantan. Etymologically, the term *Uud Danum* comes from two words: *Uud* and *Danum*. *Uud* can be interpreted as the end or source of a river. This term refers to the end or source because this *Dayak* tribe is more commonly found in the upstream areas of rivers. However, it can sometimes be connoted as a tribe (Ngawan et al., 2013). Meanwhile, *Danum* means water or river. This can be interpreted as the people of *Uud Danum* being those who are located and reside in the upstream or at the end of a river (Sujarni Alloy, Albertus, 2008).

The term *Uud Danum* should not be separated when expressing or referring to this tribe. Both words must be combined; one should not mention only one of the words, as it could lead to different connotations. A correct example of a sentence is: "The *Uud Danum* tribe resides in

the Kalimantan area.” In contrast, an incorrect example would be: “The *Uud* tribe resides in the Kalimantan area” or “The *Danum* tribe resides in Kalimantan.” Therefore, these two words should not be separated when naming the tribe.

However, if one wishes to separate them for another purpose without referring to the tribe's name, it is clearly possible. For example, *ahkuk kanik ngorih danum* (I want to drink water) and *iyai jok mocon nuk uud juoi nai rih* (who lives at the end over there). This means the terminology *Uud Danum* can also express other things, but with the note that the two words must be separated, as this could cause misunderstandings. *Uud Danum* is the name of a tribe, while *uud* and *danum* are vocabulary in the language of the *Dayak Uud Danum* people.

The *Dayak Uud Danum* often use this term primarily to indicate their identity. What kind of identity? It is their identity as *Dayak* people and also to distinguish themselves from other *Dayak* tribes, as the *Dayak* has many sub-tribes. Therefore, it becomes important to differentiate one *Dayak* group from another. Each sub-tribe of *Dayak* in Kalimantan has its own characteristics, so people should know how to distinguish between one *Dayak* and another. Thus, the terminology *Uud Danum* also serves to highlight its distinct features from other *Dayak* characteristics. Many perspectives or paradigms about the *Dayak* people tend to treat them as the same, whereas in reality, they are not. The *Dayak* people have many different sub-groups, each with distinct cultures and languages.

This terminology *Uud Danum* gives the impression that the *Dayak* people are closer to rivers because they live at the ends or sources of rivers. Indeed, in reality, the *Dayak Uud Danum* often reside in riverbank areas. Thus, for the *Dayak Uud Danum*, rivers are a source of life that must be preserved. They obtain refreshing life and fertility from the rivers. They also play and seek livelihoods in the rivers to sustain their lives.

Mythologically, this terminology is called *Uud Danum* because the *Dayak* people maintain the purity of the rivers located at the upstream or ends, ensuring that the rivers remain unpolluted. For them, rivers are vital for human life. Hence, the terminology *Uud Danum* means the end or source of the river. They predominantly reside along riverbanks, as rivers also serve as transportation access for them to go places. More importantly, rivers provide fertility, sustenance, and numerous benefits for their lives. Even today, many *Dayak Uud Danum* still live or reside in the upstream parts of rivers, especially in West Kalimantan in the Serawai and Ambalau regions of Sintang Regency. These two places are located at the upstream of the Melawi River, with a majority being Catholic believers (Kurniawan, 2019).

For the *Dayak Uud Danum*, the transcendent or the Most High is referred to by the name *Tahalak*, which is also commonly called *Jahtak Mohotarak*. This terminology carries a higher and more sacred meaning. The word *Tahalak* is a term used to refer to God—the God who continually provides comfort and life for the *Dayak Uud Danum*. *Jahtak Mohotarak* resides in the sky, in a high plateau surrounded by waters known as *Tasik Malambung Bulau Laut Bapantang Hintan* (Kurniawan, 2019).

Etymologically, the term *Tahalak* cannot be defined and described in a complex and accurate manner. Essentially, the word *Tahalak* is merely part of the vocabulary of the *Dayak*

Uud Danum tribe, used to indicate that God is exalted and Almighty. No one can match His power. He is the one who gives life to humanity. For the *Dayak Uud Danum*, this aspect is crucial in their lives as they build a profound relationship with God Himself. God truly becomes historical in their lives (cf. Riyanto, 2013). They are given life and sustained by *Tahalak*.

The term *Tahalak* is often used during customary events, particularly when offering the fruits of the earth or during other customary ceremonies. This is in line with Catholic teaching, which instructs not to take the name of the Lord your God in vain. For the *Dayak Uud Danum*, *Tahalak* is the giver of the spirit who guides every human life journey. Often, in *Dayak Uud Danum* customs, *Tahalak* is believed to be able to remove or cleanse humans from misfortune. He will lead humans to a better life and keep them away from calamity.

Tahalak, when translated into Indonesian, means “God.” God who gives fertility to human life. However, some view *Tahalak* as a deity residing in the heavens with all its peace (Kurniawan, 2019). Thus, the God that the *Dayak Uud Danum* conceptualizes may not be exactly like the God in Christian tradition. However, some also consider that this God is indeed transcendent, just as found in the tradition. God is transcendent because He is Almighty and will never be surpassed by anything. His power or greatness refers to everything that is good and true. Any expression or language from human mouths cannot adequately portray or describe the majesty or omnipotence of God. *Tahalak* embodies two other attributes of Himself: His Sacred Glory and His Exalted Majesty (Kurniawan, 2019). Therefore, the understanding of *Tahalak* cannot be taken from one side alone, as this could lead to ambiguity and incorrect connotations. Human language is limited. Because human language is limited, the truth that can be expressed or conveyed is also limited. Yet, God's existence is truly limitless.

Tahalak is primarily a terminology to express God, who has immense power in the history of human life. The God who truly becomes historical in human life. This historical God holds the truth in our daily lives (Riyanto, 2013). For example, in the experiences of the darkness and light of human life, in sorrow and joy, in anxiety and hope (Riyanto, 2021). God is indeed involved in all these aspects. He is the God who participates in the daily lives of humans. Within this, there exists a profound religious consciousness intended for an intimate relationship with the Creator. Religiosity is not merely a “feeling” in the sense of a relationship based on emotion (Riyanto, 2018). The *Dayak Uud Danum* believes that the involvement of *Tahalak* leads them to a better life; hence, it is not uncommon for the *Dayak Uud Danum* to seek help from *Sang Tahalak* or the Almighty through various ceremonies.

For the *Dayak Uud Danum*, *Tahalak* is always believed to be a guide or a leader towards a peaceful and prosperous path. As we know, humans are pilgrims. They are only temporary beings on this earth. Therefore, they need a guide and leader for their lives. A pilgrim also continuously moves towards achieving perfection in life. They are never satisfied with everything they have (Pandor, 2014). Thus, the word *Tahalak* becomes something quite sacred and revered for the *Dayak Uud Danum*. This term should not be used to express something that

complicates life or burdens others. Just like when we speak of God. Certainly, we want to express something good, not something bad, because *Tahalak* is essentially good and true.

We know that in any society, especially a pluralistic one, there is no single social system for all, nor is there only one religion (KWI, 1998). The choice of religion is not merely an identity but carries a profound relationship. At the same time, the Catholic Church teaches that faith also requires knowledge (*Fides quaerens intellectum*). This methodology is a significant contribution from Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), emphasizing that it is not enough to simply believe; one also needs to reflect deeply on God Himself. In the Second Vatican Council, faith is described as a free act of the subject to completely surrender oneself to God (KWI, 1998). This indicates that knowledge is not just knowledge about God but involves a personal relationship with God.

Knowledge of God can be influenced by various aspects, including environmental factors. Life experiences and encounters with others also shape one's knowledge of God (KWI, 1998). In Christian teaching, the essence of our faith related to God the Creator can be summarized into three main points: the creation of heaven and earth by God, the creation of humans in God's image and likeness, and finally, humanity's fall into sin (Dister, 1991).

It is essential to understand that when God creates “heaven and earth,” He creates everything. The Book of Genesis shows that God created everything good. This means that what is good comes from God Himself. The testimony of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2 serves as a kind of “preface” to the history of the covenant, which recounts God's actions with Israel (Dister, 1991). Here, God wishes to show that what He has created is not divine and therefore should not be worshipped. However, this concept is often forgotten by humans, who begin to feel the desire to be free from their attachment to God. In reality, God has given humanity the intellect to understand His works (Karlau, 2022). This Creator God is the God of the Covenant, known for His immense love, which connects Him to sinful humanity as partners in the covenant He made with us (Dister, 1991).

One crucial point to note is that God created heaven and earth from nothing. Unlike artists, carpenters, and others who require materials to create something new, the materials created by humans cannot be equated with what God has created. Thus, it is important to understand that through the creation narrative in the Book of Genesis, the people of Israel want to convey that heaven and earth are not deities but rather creations of the God of Israel (Dister, 1991). This demonstrates that God is the true God, the one who creates everything good. God's actions are a free act of His as the Triune God (Ledy Manusama, 2015).

In Genesis 1, it is narrated that humans are created “in the image of God.” This means that God's existence serves as a model for human existence (Dister, 1991). We can interpret this by affirming that humans should act according to what God teaches. This reality shows that we are different from other creatures. It is important to assert that the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*) manifested in humans possess a high quality (Lumintang et al., 2017).

We can understand that although humans are created in God's image and as the foremost creatures, they are not divine; rather, they are created beings with limited life, abilities, and

knowledge. However, God takes the initiative to connect with these mortal and fragile beings, making them His coworkers in this world to proclaim the good news. God entrusts humanity with the responsibility to manage and care for what is on this earth. Through this task given by God, humans have the opportunity to express and “realize” themselves as beings created in the image of God, demonstrating through actions that they are indeed responsible beings before God, their fellow humans, and the earth (plants, animals, air, seas, the entire environment, and the ecological world) (Dister, 1991).

The *Imago Dei* certainly encompasses the entirety of human life, which can complexly distinguish between good and evil. God made humans as partners in building the Kingdom of God on earth (Vinsen, 2022). Christian theologians often strive to identify that humans created in God's image possess qualities that make them unique or special (Rabie-Boshoff & Buitendag, 2021). Here, God wishes to show His unbreakable relationship with humans as partners. God created humans to be good, forming a community. This community empowers humans to manage and protect what God has given them.

Although we are made co-workers by God, we are merely creatures, not creators. There is a fundamental difference that must be well understood. However, humanity falls into the trap of its own uniqueness, acting as if it were the creator, thus violating the boundaries set by God for it (Genesis 2:16-17), which leads to danger for itself and the world (Dister, 1991). Humans are given the freedom to express themselves, and they are entrusted with the responsibility to manage everything on this earth. However, the freedom granted by God to humanity is often misused to distance themselves from God.

This act of rebellion against God seems to be a definitive decision that humanity has power over its own life. People are free to do whatever they desire. The experience of God becomes impoverished because humans do not wish to have an experience of God. What humans experience in their life's journey will influence how they view God (KWI, 1998). This will lead humanity to fall into sin. God has entrusted many things to humanity, but this is met with rebellion. People isolate themselves in a world they wish to build on their own (Genesis 11) without God (Dister, 1991). Thus, it is not surprising that the relationships between humans and God, humans and other humans, and humans and nature become damaged. These relationships are a single reality that is inseparable (Saeng, 2015).

The three points above related to God cannot be narrowed down as if there is no continuation from God regarding human actions. God does not remain silent about what humans do. As Christians, we acknowledge that God is a God of Love. He always offers forgiveness to us, sinful humans. God is the Savior.

The work of salvation that God planned from the beginning was already in progress during the Old Testament, but it reached its fullness in the New Testament, when the Word of God became man, turning a history of misfortune into a history of salvation (Dister, 1991). Jesus became the Savior who died on the cross to redeem humanity's sins. In Jesus Christ, salvation is achieved in the sense of complete unity between humanity and God. Jesus revealed Himself to humanity to lead them to God for salvation (Lelono, 2017). This breaks the vicious

cycle of sin and death, allowing humans to live in faith in Christ, who is reunited with God, the Source of Life (Dister, 1991).

We know that God forgives sinful humans. At the same time, God desires to renew humanity. As we know, God's work in Jesus Christ, who was crucified, is the pinnacle of His saving work in this world. However, we cannot forget that within this work is the role of the Holy Spirit, who guides us in that work of salvation. God renews this world through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is love that comes from the Father and the Son, the bond that unites them (Dister, 1991).

From here, we see that God's work through the Holy Spirit is a work of love: a God who brings life, moves, liberates, saves, preserves, and renews (Dister, 1991). We understand that in our lives as humans, God's presence strengthens us and challenges us, comforts us, and opens new perspectives for our future. The same applies when we see God living in the lives of the pious. We can learn that God always desires what is good for human life.

In explaining the transcendent from both the cultural perspective of the *Dayak Uud Danum* and the viewpoint of the Catholic Church, we can see the connections between the two. This certainly creates a good space for pastoral care or theology in proclaiming the joyful news in accordance with local culture. From this, we can see that from a specific culture, Christians strive to filter values that can be instilled in the life of faith (Clark, 2001).

In the context of the *Dayak Uud Danum* culture, we can observe that there are Christian values we can glean, especially when the local community views the divine as the source of their life both in this world and in the afterlife, which is referred to as Jahtah Mohotarak. At that moment, Christian values become a good place and a means for contextual theology. Here, Christian values align with local cultural values.

At the same time, we can engage in contextual theology as taught by Stephen Bevans, especially in the perspective of the transcendental model. The transcendental model presents a fundamental shift in the process concerning reality (Bevans, 2002). This model sees reality as something that is not external or separate from human life but is genuinely fully involved in human reality. A fundamental assumption of the transcendental model is that we begin contextual theology not by focusing on the essence or core of the gospel proclamation or tradition and the like, nor by attempting to thematize or analyze a particular context or linguistic expressions within that context (Bevans, 2002).

In Bevans' transcendental model, we also need to consider the assumptions regarding the idea of divine revelation. Divine revelation is present in human experience, as long as a subject is willing to be open to the words of Scripture when they are read and reflected upon, open to the various events in daily life, and open to the values embodied in a cultural tradition (Bevans, 2002). This means there is an openness in humanity to collaborate with God who offers Himself in building a friendship with humanity. However, it is also necessary to note that what underpins the transcendental model is that when we fully give freedom to this transcendental and transcultural process as we attempt to express our faith, we will undoubtedly

achieve a faith expression that genuinely represents our identity as subjects of a specific history and culture (Bevans, 2002).

The process of doing theology certainly contributes positively to proclaiming faith to the local community while considering spiritual values. In the culture of the *Dayak Uud Danum*, which is predominantly Catholic in terms of population, the proclamation of faith becomes essential. Thus, as pastoral actors, it is not enough to simply create a systematic or thematic pastoral approach but to engage with the local culture to identify spiritual needs that are appropriate for Christian communities.

At the same time, the proclamation of faith is a significant responsibility. However, it must also be recognized that the concept of the Divine in the *Dayak Uud Danum* culture can provide a valuable theological contribution to the life of faith. This is especially relevant in the context of our pluralistic nation, which encompasses diverse cultures and ethnicities. Theology becomes alive because its locus is rooted in local wisdom. This means there is a wealth of insights that need to be explored and developed in the life of faith.

The method of doing theology in the context of the *Dayak Uud Danum* culture certainly leads to sustainable proclamation. As previously explained, God in the *Dayak Uud Danum* culture is the God who gives life and possesses omnipotence. From this, we can derive a model of proclamation that God reigns over every nation. The proclamation of the kingdom of God is the proclamation of God's mercy and, therefore, a message of hope. This hope inspires individuals to continue seeing themselves as humble yet valuable in the sight of God.

The kingdom of God means that God intervenes to save, liberating the world entirely from the power of evil. In this moment, the *Dayak Uud Danum* people also realize that the Divine descends into the world to free humanity from evil, envy, anger, and jealousy. Thus, it becomes an important value for pastoral development that is grounded in the local community, especially concerning the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. This proclamation certainly directs people toward repentance. The kingdom of God is a calling and an offer of God's grace, which must be accepted with a faith that is expressed through good deeds, for the kingdom of God, while it signifies God's mercy, is also a reality for humanity.

This reality cannot be denied, as God and humanity are interdependent in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God in the world. Moreover, the hope for the Kingdom of God is not directed towards an event that will happen in the future but is oriented towards God Himself and becomes a reality in that very surrender, as humanity encounters God. However, in due time, humanity will meet God, who provides that hope.

CONCLUSION

The culture existing within our nation, Indonesia, certainly possesses its own wisdom. This wisdom encompasses not only philosophical values but also the religious values of the local community. Similarly, the *Dayak Uud Danum* tribe views *Jahtah Mohotarak* as the Divine, which brings hope to humanity. In this context, Christian values, especially regarding the Divine or the transcendent in Christian teachings, become relevant for contextual theology.

Culture is not merely viewed as a reality inherent to human identity but holds greater value. It is within this wisdom that God reigns in human life. God makes humanity a partner or collaborator in realizing the Kingdom of God in this world. Although humanity is generally weak and easily falls into sin, God, with all His creativity, renews humanity through the power of His Holy Spirit, guiding them toward repentance.

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