

The Encounter of the Pentecostal Community with the Batu Simbuang Ritual of the Toraja Society: An Exploration within Amos Yong's Intercultural Theology Framework

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Abstract

This article applies Amos Yong's approach to Intercultural Theology as a framework for connecting Pentecostalism with the Batu Simbuang ritual in Toraja society, Indonesia. The background of this research is grounded in the perception that pentecostalism is often seen as having a negative attitude toward culture. This study found that the roots of pentecostal practices are closely linked to culture. Furthermore, the article shows the shared values between Pentecostalism and the Batu Simbuang ritual, which is a part of Toraja society's life. The contribution of this research lies in its exploration of Amos Yong's Approach to Intercultural Theology as a framework for fostering connections between Pentecostalism and the Batu Simbuang ritual in Toraja society. By challenging the perception of Pentecostalism as culturally conservative, this research reveals the intricate connection between the Pentecostal doctrine and culture.

Keywords: Amos Yong; Batu Simbuang Ritual; Intercultural Theology Framework; Pentecostal Community; Pentecostalism; Toraja Society



INTRODUCTION

The discourse within contextual theology becomes particularly intriguing when a Christian community engages with a local culture that firmly upholds customs and traditions. In this context, there is an interaction between religious beliefs rooted in Church traditions and religious practices reflected in the customs and rituals of local culture. This encounter inevitably carries complexity owing to cultural differences, historical backgrounds, and diverse beliefs. A sense of superiority can arise on both sides from a religious or local cultural standpoint. This often manifests in harmful practices such as rejection, stereotyping, or conflict, further widening the gap. Therefore, it is essential to understand these dynamics wisely and seek a common ground that fosters mutual respect and harmony.

The intersection between Pentecostalism in *Toraja* and *Batu Simbuang* Ritual exemplifies this complexity. The Pentecostal community identifies itself as a Christian community, formed based on events recorded in Acts 2:1-13 (Vondey, 2013). On the other hand, the *Batu Simbuang* Ritual involved the erection of *menhirs* or commemorative monuments for the deceased. It is a ritual part of the *Rambu Solo'* Ceremony (Toraja Death Ceremony) in Rapasan, where a platform called *rante'* (a certain place where the *Rambu Solo'* ceremony is held) was first established, and then the *Batu Simbuang* components (main component), Kalosi, Simbuang, Buangin, Statue, and Parents (there are five depending on custom) are placed, serving as a place to tether buffalo (the physical stones or structures serve as places to tether buffalo that will be sacrificed during the ceremony) (A. Lande, personal communication, October 2023). The arrival of the Pentecostal Church in Toraja in 1949 was seen as a threat by the local community because of its rejection of traditional cultural practices central to the Toraja people's identity (Maćkowiak, 2024). This event began in early August 1949 when three young women—S. Banne Toding Padang,

Ruth Inggi, and Bertha Ba'ka' –experienced a spiritual revival and returned to Limbu to testify, teach, and sing spiritual songs. Over time, the Pentecostal community rejected the slaughter of animals, especially buffaloes and pigs, because they were seen as acts of idol worship (Budiman, 2013). The interaction between these two beliefs requires appropriate contextual theology efforts and one such approach is Intercultural Theology.

Intercultural Theology is a form of contextual theology developed by Amos Yong, emphasizing the Pentecost event or the day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-13. Yong concludes that the Pentecost event in Jerusalem has intercultural elements, as stated: “Each person could understand them as if they were speaking in their own native language (Acts 2:6). This left the crowd astounded, amazed, and bewildered (2:7a, 12a)” (A. Yong, 2017). Yong’s emphasis on the Pentecost event highlights the intercultural nature of the Holy Spirit’s work, showing how God’s message transcends cultural boundaries and is communicated through diverse languages and contexts. The Holy Spirit works in diverse languages and cultures to convey the message and power of God to many people. Within the church, there is an intercultural movement of the Holy Spirit that aims to redeem various languages and cultures throughout human history for divine purposes (Vondey & Mittelstadt, 2013).

In Indonesia, few studies have focused on the encounters between Pentecostals and local culture (Pasaribu, 2025; Toansiba et al., 2025; Yohanes, 2024). However, the importance of various efforts in contextual theology has been emphasized by Pentecostal theologians such as Anderson, who states that contextualization is the path to gaining a profound understanding of Christian practices within a multicultural framework (A. H. Anderson, 2017). Simatupang (2022) concludes that in relation to local culture, Christians should avoid considering culture as contamination or detrimental syncretism.

Instead, it is essential to understand that Christianity can undergo various adaptations and cultural translations without losing its essence as a follower of Christ. In line with this, research from the Calvinism perspective also recognizes the importance of contextualization (Du Plessis, 2020; Woo, 2017). For example, Agustinus et al. (2023) connect the *Dipopantunu Bai* Tradition with Calvin's concept of redemption. The importance of contextualization is also recognized from Evangelical circles as in Niebuhr's five views on culture (Carson et al., 1993). From this, it can be said that every culture in a particular place has its relevance to Christian values

The thesis statement is that intercultural theology can serve as a bridge that embraces the differences between Pentecostal views on culture and the local beliefs of the Toraja community while maintaining a clear distinction between cultural expressions and theological beliefs. While cultural practices and expressions are deeply tied to a community's identity, theological beliefs about God's nature and salvation are distinct and should be engaged separately. By defining intercultural theology more clearly, this study provides a framework for understanding how Pentecostal theology can be communicated within the Toraja cultural context without conflating cultural practices with core theological doctrines. Furthermore, intercultural theology can create a space for more open and harmonious dialogue, addressing tensions arising from the Toraja community's perception of Pentecostals as a threat.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with an ethnographic methodology. According to Atkinson, ethnography is an effort undertaken to describe or depict the behavior, way of life, or customs of people within a community (Clements et al., 2022; Lichterman, 2022; Mekala M, 2022). Ethnographic research focuses on describing

the culture evolving within a group, such as identifying specific patterns, habits, rituals, or traditions practiced by a particular community that influence social and mental behavior ([Mosse et al., 2023](#); [Simanjuntak et al., 2022](#); [Wiessner, 2022](#)).

This study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained through interviews with two *To' Pareng* who deeply understand Toraja culture, particularly the Batu Simbuang ritual, involving Toraja cultural experts and observers, as well as direct observation of the location where the *Batu Simbuang* stands. Secondary data are derived from literature related to the researched topic, which relates to Pentecostalism, Intercultural Theology, and the *Batu Simbuang* ritual. After collecting the data, the researchers analyzed them using critical ethnography to offer solutions that should be implemented ([Longman, 2002](#); [Nabhan-Warren, 2011](#); [Pesut & Reimer-Kirkham, 2010](#)). The goal of critical ethnography in this article is to provide a comprehensive and inclusive perspective on the Pentecostal practice regarding the *Batu Simbuang* tradition as a cultural practice and the customs of the Toraja community.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Batu Simbuang as a Memorial Stone

Batu Simbuang was a commemorative monument for the deceased. The erection of *Batu Simbuang* is one of the rituals of the *Rambu Solo* ceremony or the Toraja funeral ceremony. In an interview with Saul Ramba, a cultural observer and Tour Guide at Bori' Kalimbuang Tourist Object, where 102 *Batu Simbuang* menhirs stand, he mentioned that *Batu Simbuang* serves as a memorial for the descendants of the deceased, commonly referred to as grandparents ([S. Ramba, personal communication, November 2023](#)). In contrast, Lande, who is a *To' Pareng* (someone who holds a high social status, typically a noble or a traditional leader), stated that *Batu Simbuang*,

once erected in the *rante'* (platform), is a place to tether the buffalo that will be slaughtered and serve as provisions for the deceased. However, both sources agree that *Batu Simbuang* is closely related to honoring the deceased, and ceremonies are conducted to pay respect (A. Lande, personal communication, October 2023).

The primary requirement for erecting *Batu Simbuang* is the *rante'*. This is the platform or place where *Batu Simbuang* is erected (Adams & Robin, 2022). According to Lande, not all Toraja communities have a *rante'*. It is owned only by Toraja communities that have conducted large-scale ceremonies involving the sacrifice of many buffaloes and those belonging to the high caste (A. Lande, personal communication, October 2023). The position of the *rante'* in Tongkonan is usually in the middle. However, Lande emphasized that it does not necessarily have to be in the middle; it depends on the chosen and agreed-upon location.

***Batu Simbuang* as a Social Strata Marker**

The *Batu Simbuang* ritual was not performed at all the *Rambu Solo* ceremonies. *Rambu Solo* itself consists of several types based on the social strata adhered to by an individual. There are four levels of *Rambu Solo* ceremonies: the *disilli* ceremony (ceremony for the lowest social strata or children), *dipasangbongi* ceremony (an overnight ceremony for ordinary people or commoners), *dibatang* or *digoya Tedong* ceremony (ceremony for middle-class nobility), and *rapasan* ceremony (the highest ceremony for the nobility) (Panggarra & Sumule, 2019). From this, it can be seen that the *Batu Simbuang* ritual only occurs during the *rapasan* ceremony within *Rambu Solo*.

In an interview with Research Participant 1 regarding the forms of ceremonies in *Rambu Solo*, the participant explained that in the *Rapasan* ceremony (the highest *Rambu Solo*), a minimum of 24 buffaloes must be sacrificed, and *Batu Simbuang* must be present (S. Ramba, personal communication, November 2023). The second participant

also stated that at least 24 buffaloes had to be sacrificed for one *Batu Simbuang*. However, Ramba also explained that, historically, the *Batu Simbuang* ritual could be performed even with the sacrifice of only one or two buffaloes. He added that in *Bori' Kalimbuang*, the ritual could be conducted with only 12 sacrificed buffaloes, but certain conditions must be fulfilled (A. Lande, personal communication, October 2023). This indicates that the process of erecting *Batu Simbuang* in different areas of the Toraja community may vary.

Process of the *Batu Simbuang* Ritual

The *Batu Simbuang* ritual generally consists of three parts: stone selection, stone pulling, and stone planting. In the stone selection process, there was a difference between ancient and modern times. In the past, Toraja communities unfamiliar with technological advancements selected *Batu Simbuang* from high to low ground to facilitate transportation, and the selection was not based on aesthetic considerations. In contrast, in modern times, *Batu Simbuang* is selected and can be shaped considering its aesthetic value, as there are specialized experts involved in the stone carving process (Adams & Robin, 2022). The shaping of *Batu Simbuang* that occurs in modern *Rambu Solo* ceremonies already considers aesthetic value.

The next process involves bringing *Batu Simbuang* to the *rante'*, commonly referred to as *Matarik Batu Simbuang*. Transportation involves several people. In the practices of ancient communities, pulling the *Batu Simbuang* was done by many people in one village and usually took to 5-7 months. In modern times, *Matarik Batu Simbuang* does not require much time because tools are used to facilitate its transportation of the *Batu Simbuang*. During *Batu Simbuang's* pulling, the pullers usually shout in a specific language, and in certain areas, it is not uncommon to use coarse language. The community believes that shouting these specific calls will ease the transportation process (Wahyuni, 2018). As explained by the

participant, during the pulling of the Batu Simbuang, several components are attached to the stone, such as *ijuk* (palm tree), *Kalosi*, *Pattung* (bamboo), and other components depending on the region. Additionally, buffaloes and pigs are slaughtered beforehand as a gesture of gratitude for the community's participation in moving and transporting the stone. This act is a form of familial hospitality, showcasing appreciation and generosity toward those who contribute. The final process was Batu Simbuang's erection. When *Batu Simbuang* is about to stand, the *tomina* (prayer leader) prays to *Puang Matua* (The God of the Torajan People), considered the source of life and all creation, embodying wisdom, compassion, and power. Then, before *Batu Simbuang* is erected in the prepared hole, various components, such as pieces of pans or pots and beads, are placed into the hole. The pans or pots included in planting *Batu Simbuang* symbolize strength (Salubongga, 2022). In *Bori' Kalimbuang*, when the pot is placed in the hole, indicating the location where *Batu Simbuang* will stand, it signifies that the person is brave. After the stone is erected in the prepared hole, there is a tradition in which the children and grandchildren of the deceased take blood and rub it on the stone (Toraja terminology is *ditoding*). This was performed to ensure safety and blessing.

Based on the explanation of the *Batu Simbuang* ritual's role in the *Rambu Solo* ceremony, as well as the process from stone selection to stone planting, this ritual embodies important meanings and values, such as honoring ancestors, solidarity, and hospitality. These values act as binding forces and strengthen relationships within the Toraja community. Therefore, the next discussion focuses on the deeper meanings and values that the *Batu Simbuang* ritual holds within the community.

The Meaning Behind the Ritual of *Batu Simbuang*

Through interviews, direct observations, and a review of the literature closely related to the topic discussed, the researcher identified numerous values and meanings that should be preserved in a world increasingly leading individuals toward individualistic attitudes. The values and meanings are outlined as follows.

Value of Respect

This is evident in the erected *Batu Simbuang* dedicated to the deceased, representing a symbol of strength that should evoke a sense of reverence. The erected *Batu Simbuang* serves as a reminder to future generations of the messages and moral values left behind by the departed parents. The values left behind are expected to serve as examples for the next generation to hold onto as life guidelines, and to apply these values as much as possible to build good relationships with family members and others.

Community and Hospitality

The process of pulling the stone, carried out by many people, demonstrates the village's solidarity and unity. The community involved in pulling *Batu Simbuang* consists of locals where the ritual will take place. The pulling of the stone opens a space for anyone who consciously wants to engage in this process, regardless of family background or social status. This demonstrates the importance of maintaining communal value. The more people involved in pulling *Batu Simbuang*, the faster the process of transferring the stone. The spirit of unity and mutual cooperation is evident in this process.

Hospitality has also been displayed in this tradition. The family hosting the event in the process of transferring *Batu Simbuang* will sacrifice a buffalo or pig for consumption by the assisting community. Volunteers who willingly participate in this process are not paid money or other material forms. The hospitality of the family is

demonstrated by sacrificing a buffalo or pig as a special form of gratitude and appreciation.

Social Strata and Spiritualism

Planting *Batu Simbuang* can reveal a person's social status because of the minimum number of buffalo sacrifices required (24 buffalos). Samuel and Moris found a misinterpretation of Tedong (the term for buffalo), which should be offered based on love but began to be directed towards the interest of showing off (Moris & Rahman, 2022). However, the author found from interviews that, in the past, the ritual of *Batu Simbuang* could be established by sacrificing only one or two buffaloes (S. Ramba, personal communication, November 2023). This was done purely in the form of respect. From this, we can see that the concept of spirituality from *Batu Simbuang's* tradition is demonstrated.

Intercultural Theology

Amos Yong's development of Intercultural Theology arises from his concern about the placement of topics such as interreligious dialogue, encounters between religions, and intercultural theology. According to Yong, these topics are often relegated by both Western and non-Western theologians to mission theology within Practical Theology, where they are treated as secondary and lack normative implications in broader theological studies (A. Yong, 2017). This positioning leads Yong to argue that such topics are not considered central or core elements of the theological discipline. Moreover, the religious factors that underpin these discussions, such as the theological and spiritual dimensions of interreligious encounters, are frequently overlooked, limiting their full integration into mainstream theological discourse. Yong advocated for a broader, more normative inclusion of these topics in the development of theological studies. The Holy Spirit's work across diverse cultures enables people from

different cultural backgrounds to experience unity and healing through spirit. This aligns with the discussions in trauma studies, particularly in addressing collective and personal suffering, where the Holy Spirit as the Paraclete (helper, counselor, advocate, and comforter) plays a crucial role in guiding and empowering individuals through trauma (A. G. Yong, 2024).

Amos Yong's study of Intercultural Theology is grounded in the Pentecost event, unlike some Pentecostal theologians who base their doctrines on the Azusa Street revival. While the Azusa Street revival emphasizes spiritual renewal and the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, Yong focuses on the Pentecost event as a foundational moment for understanding the Holy Spirit's role in bridging cultural and linguistic divides and fostering unity in diversity (Tambunan & Ruslim, 2021). The Baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost amazed witnesses as disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, who spoke in foreign languages (A. Yong, 2005). This demonstrates God's relationship with the world (Chan, 2014). The Pentecost event serves as a witness to many nations (Oyetade, 2020) and the value of Glossolalia can be understood in a broad and relational context (Stephenson, 2020). The Holy Spirit is seen as a unifier that urges the church to engage, accept, and understand various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, forming the foundation of ecclesiological identity in diversity and unity in plurality (Kärkkäinen, 2002).

In addition to Yong, several other Pentecostal theologians also recognize the importance of Intercultural Theology, which focuses on the relationship between faith and culture, seeking to understand how theological ideas can be communicated and understood across diverse cultural contexts. Hollenweger, a Pentecostal theologian from Switzerland, analyzes, investigates, and critiques the Pentecost event, emphasizing culture as the key to understanding it (A. Anderson, 2011). The Pentecost phenomenon indicates the presence of cultural

interactions that need to be understood. Karkkainen (2014) views the significance of Intercultural Theology in Pentecostal theology and strives to educate Pentecostal academics to develop this theology. “Speak in Tongue” reflects a holistic mission service (Kärkkäinen, 2010). As a Pentecostal theologian, Karkkainen does not limit the work of the Holy Spirit to the personal realm but extends it to the communal sphere. Vondey (2010) argues that the ecumenical ecclesiology study of Pentecostal learners also results in mature thinking about ethnicity, culture, and religion. These theologians convincingly emphasize the urgency of intercultural studies in pentecostal studies.

To understand culture through Intercultural Theology, it is essential to recognize that pentecostals must consider elements such as doctrines, spiritual practices, religious rituals, and diverse cultural contexts when interacting with other cultures or belief systems (A. Yong, 2017). Inclusive intercultural theology appreciates the breadth of these elements and seeks to embrace diverse beliefs when encountering different cultures without becoming exclusive. This approach aligns with proclaiming the work of the Holy Spirit in a pluralistic world (A. Yong, 2008). From a missiological perspective, the original Pentecost event demonstrates that God desires to bless many people and transcend cultural boundaries (Pinnock, 2016). However, Pentecostals would assert that scripture reveals that God blesses through the Holy Spirit only when individuals repent of their acts against God and others, entrust themselves to Jesus, and commit to following and obeying Him alone. This pivotal moment, which occurs at the end of Act 2, signifies the fulfilment of God’s promise to empower believers through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, intercultural theology provides a framework for Pentecostals to engage with other cultures (Westerlund, 2024; Wrogemann, 2023; Wrogemann & Stahlhoefer, 2024)and beliefs while holding fast to the essential gospel

message, fostering inclusivity without compromising core theological convictions.

Encounter Between Pentecostals and the Ritual of *Batu Simbuang*

Based on the above discussion, it is discovered that there are values and meanings behind *Batu Simbuang's* ritual. On the other hand, according to the study of Intercultural Theology, Pentecostals, when examined in terms of history and the doctrines they adhere to, have a strong relationship with culture. This demonstrates a convergence point between the Pentecostals in Toraja and the ritual of *Batu Simbuang* as a practice and symbol in Toraja society.

The Pentecost event, which serves as a doctrinal foundation for Pentecostals, illustrates its significant cultural elements. The event in which the disciples spoke in other languages (speaking in tongues) did not make Pentecostals an exclusive Christian group (Parker, 2015). It can be said that the roots of Pentecostal doctrines are inseparable from culture.

Similarly, Pentecostals in Toraja, who lay the groundwork for building their doctrines through the Pentecost event, and the Toraja community also have cultural practices and rituals crucial in shaping their identities. The *Batu Simbuang* ritual is a concrete example of how the meanings and values embedded in traditional practices have become an integral part of Toraja life and culture. The *Batu Simbuang* ritual has deep meaning and value. This practice is performed to honor ancestors and strengthen the social bonds among community members. More than just a series of actions or ceremonies, traditional practices like *Batu Simbuang* are a way for the Toraja community to maintain its identity through culture.

Thus, Pentecostals In Toraja and the ritual of *Batu Simbuang* can be brought together through Intercultural Theology. There is a shared interpretation of values in the Pentecost event and the *Batu Simbuang* ritual. As Pentecostals understand, the Holy Spirit works for unity and

oneness, and this value is also present in the *Batu Simbuang* ritual, where many people's processes of pulling stones reflect the value of unity. Furthermore, the ecumenical ecclesiology study is a form of pentecostal participation in building relationships with local culture and other religions, as stated by Vondey. This is also evident in the *Batu Simbuang* Ritual. In the *Batu Simbuang* ritual, people pulling stones come from different economic backgrounds, lineages, and church organizational backgrounds (when Christianity entered), all of which are embraced in this stone-pulling process. Lastly, Pentecostals believe in hospitality when the Holy Spirit dwells in someone. This value is also present in the *Batu Simbuang* ritual, where the family in the process of the *Batu Simbuang* ritual slaughters cattle and pigs to be consumed by people who willingly help them. It is a form of hospitality. These values can be beautiful encounters between Pentecostals and the ritual of *Batu Simbuang*.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the encounter between Pentecostalism and the *Batu Simbuang* ritual within the Toraja community through Amos Yong's Intercultural Theology framework, revealing that Pentecostalism, often perceived as culturally conservative, can meaningfully engage with local traditions. The research demonstrated that both Pentecostalism and the *Batu Simbuang* ritual share core values, such as respect for ancestors, community solidarity, and hospitality, which are central to both practices. By applying Amos Yong's emphasis on the Pentecost event as a model of cultural inclusivity, this study highlighted how the Holy Spirit works across diverse cultures, fostering unity and understanding. The *Batu Simbuang* ritual, which focuses on collective effort and community bonds, mirrors Pentecostal beliefs in the Holy Spirit's unifying power. This study thus shows that Pentecostals, when guided by Intercultural

Theology, can bridge the gap between faith and culture, fostering a more inclusive and respectful dialogue that celebrates both the gospel and local traditions, ultimately transforming Pentecostalism's perceived cultural conservatism into an appreciation for spiritual significance within diverse cultural practices.

Further research could deepen the engagement between pentecostalism and local cultural practices by involving Indonesian theologians and practitioners in a more in-depth dialogue. This could include conversations on how Pentecostalism, emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit, intersects with various Indonesian cultural expressions and rituals. Engaging local scholars and theologians could offer new insights into how these cultural traditions shape and inform pentecostal practices in Indonesia. Additionally, comparative studies between different cultural contexts within Indonesia could highlight unique challenges and opportunities for pentecostalism to develop a more inclusive theology that respects and embraces local identities. Through these steps, this research can contribute to the ongoing development of an intercultural Pentecostal theology that is relevant to the Indonesian context and offers a broader, global perspective on faith and culture.

Author Contributions

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from the respondents before the interviews.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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