



# *Sigale-gale* and the *Imago Dei* in Toba Batak Culture: An Interdisciplinary Perspective for the Integration of Christian Religious Education


Roedy Silitonga

Universitas Pelita Harapan, Jakarta, Indonesia

Email: [roedy.silitonga@uph.edu](mailto:roedy.silitonga@uph.edu)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4368-3281>

[roedy.silitonga@uph.edu](mailto:roedy.silitonga@uph.edu)

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## Abstract

This research analyses the local wisdom of *Sigale-gale* in Batak Toba culture as a social symbol rich in anthropological, philosophical, and theological meaning. While previous studies have largely examined *Sigale-gale* from anthropological or folkloric perspectives, limited attention has been given to its theological significance within the framework of Christian religious education. As a representation of a strong patrilineal system, *Sigale-gale* is positioned not only as a cultural artifact but also as a reflection of the collective spiritual longing of the Batak Toba community. This research applies an interdisciplinary approach: cultural anthropology to understand the traditional social structure of the Batak, Dooyeweerd's modal aspects philosophy to explore the interconnected dimensions of reality, and Reformed theology to interpret the meaning of humanity as the *imago Dei* within the context of *Sigale-gale*. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, literature-based, hermeneutical-theological approach, grounded in critical and interpretive engagement with existing ethnographic scholarship, rather than primary ethnographic fieldwork. The analysis shows that *Sigale-gale* can function as a dialogical medium between Christian faith and local culture, enabling a theological reinterpretation of human dignity, social structure, and cultural meaning. By integrating philosophical and theological perspectives into cultural analysis, this research proposes a conceptual framework for the integration of Christian Religious Education that is incarnational, contextual, and transformative, particularly in addressing epistemological fragmentation, digitally mediated subjectivity, and the growing tendency to reduce education to instrumental outcomes within global cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** *Sigale-gale*, Batak Toba, Cultural Anthropology, Reformed Theology, *Imago Dei*, Modal Aspects of Herman Dooyeweerd.

## Introduction

The story of *Sigale-gale* (*gale*, meaning weak, soft) is one of the mythological narratives rooted in the Batak Toba culture in North Sumatra, Indonesia. This wooden doll that can “dance” is not only a cultural tourist attraction but also an important symbol in the social-religious system of the Batak Toba community, which highly values patrilineal family structure. According to oral traditions preserved in the Simanindo region of Samosir Island, North Sumatra, Indonesia, *Sigale-gale* was created as a symbolic representation of an unborn son—a figure ritually “manifested” to fulfill customary requirements in the funeral ceremonies of nobles who had no male heirs.



In the context of the Batak Toba community, male descendants are not merely biological heirs but serve as a bridge connecting personal identity, clan continuity, and social honor (Rohman, 2025; Mustika, 2018). The absence of a male heir is not merely seen as a personal loss but as a social and spiritual crisis threatening the societal structure. Therefore, the creation of *Sigale-gale* doll is a cultural response to this void (Manurung et al, 2024). However, the theological implications of this cultural response—particularly in relation to Christian anthropology and education—remain insufficiently explored. The rituals accompanying the creation of the doll, from the selection of the tree, the recitation of mantras, to the attachment of *ulos*, represent the integration of spiritual, symbolic, and performative dimensions within the Batak Toba cosmology, which is closely connected to belief in *Debata Mula Jadi Nabolon*, ancestors, and the harmony of nature (Siahaan, 2013; Sitanggang, 2023).

As a cultural object, *Sigale-gale* doll holds a complexity of meaning that cannot be reduced to mere aesthetic or functional value. According to Martozet et al., (2021), the story of *Sigale-gale*, passed down from generation to generation through the oral traditions of the Batak Toba community, is viewed as an educational tool containing messages about the spirit of struggle in defending ancestral lands and the values of life that shape the identity and social solidarity of that community. Research on *Sigale-gale* serves as a locus for various layers of meaning, including anthropological, philosophical, and theological dimensions.

From an anthropological perspective, the *Sigale-gale* doll illustrates how the Batak Toba community constructs symbolic mechanisms to sustain social order through forms of spiritual personification. Firmando's (2024) analysis highlights the Batak Toba understanding of an ongoing relationship between the living and ancestral spirits, which is ritually articulated through practices such as tomb statue making, sacrificial offerings, pilgrimages, and customary ceremonies. These practices do not function merely as expressions of reverence, but operate as symbolic structures through which cosmological beliefs are embedded within and reinforce patrilineal social relations. Within this framework, *Sigale-gale* emerges as a culturally mediated expression of religious meaning that integrates ritual practice, social hierarchy, and communal identity. This anthropological reading provides a critical foundation for further philosophical and theological interpretation.

Philosophically, this research is based on the Reformed philosophy proposed by Herman Dooyeweerd (1955) to understand *Sigale-gale* as a cultural phenomenon shaped by diverse and interconnected dimensions of meaning. Rather than viewing reality as a collection of objective facts, Dooyeweerd's framework understands cultural expressions as part of the regular coherence of modal aspects that shape human experience and community life. When applied selectively, this perspective allows *Sigale-gale* to be analyzed across historical, social, aesthetic, and pistis dimensions, revealing how local wisdom represents the formation of human meaning in concrete cultural forms. This method offers a non-reductionist basis for philosophically examining Batak Toba culture, without simplifying its significance into purely anthropological descriptions or theological abstractions.

Furthermore, a theological approach grounded in Reformed theology calls for a critical evaluation of *Sigale-gale* in relation to the Christian understanding of humanity as a personal creation made in the image of the Triune God (*imago Dei*) (Bavinck, 2004). From this perspective, *Sigale-gale* should be understood neither as a neutral cultural artifact nor as a theological substitute for human existence, but as a symbolic expression that reflects both humanity's longing for continuity and the distortions of meaning characteristic of fallen creation. As a cultural response to death and loss, *Sigale-gale* embodies an attempt to

sustain presence and social continuity through symbolic representation. This raises fundamental theological questions concerning the limits of cultural symbols in addressing human finitude and the rupture introduced by sin. Consequently, theological reflection provides a critical space to assess cultural spirituality in light of Christ's redemptive work, particularly within contexts where rich cultural heritage coexists with spiritual ambiguity.

This research aims to examine the meaning of *Sigale-gale* as a form of local wisdom that reflects the theological and philosophical dynamics of the Batak Toba community. By integrating cultural anthropology, Dooyeweerd's philosophy of the modal aspects, and Reformed theology, the research seeks to develop an interdisciplinary framework for interpreting *Sigale-gale* in relation to human dignity, social structure, and cultural spirituality. Rather than treating *Sigale-gale* merely as a relic of the past, this research approaches it as a living cultural symbol that continues to shape meaning-making processes within contemporary contexts. In this way, *Sigale-gale* is examined as a critical point of engagement between Christian faith and local culture, contributing to a contextual and reflective understanding of Christian Religious Education.

Figure 1: Historical photograph of a *Sigale-gale* performance (1991), included for illustrative and contextual purposes only.



Source: Author's archive.

### ***Sigale-gale* within Dooyeweerd's Modal Aspect Framework: Philosophical and Theological Reflections**

Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy of modal aspects provides a non-theoretical framework for understanding cultural phenomena as structured fields of meaning, rather than as neutral or purely empirical objects. In this perspective, reality is understood as a coherent order formed by laws, consisting of indivisible dimensions that together shape human experience, social practices, and cultural expressions (Dooyeweerd, 1955, 1984; Stafleu, 1984; Glas, 2019). In the broader context of the Reformed philosophical tradition, this non-reductionist orientation is consistent with Kuyper's emphasis that cultural life develops in separate but interrelated spheres, none of which can be considered neutral or autonomous in isolation (Kuyper, 1931), as well as with Wolters' emphasis on the intrinsic structural integrity of created reality, which rejects reduction to purely functional or instrumental interpretations (Wolters, 2005). In the context of this research, Dooyeweerd's modal framework is used as a point of orientation and conceptual reference, rather than as a



comprehensive analytical scheme, to establish a non-theoretical horizon for interpreting *Sigale-gale* as a phenomenon rooted in culture. A concrete analysis of selected modal aspects related to *Sigale-gale* as an expression of Batak Toba culture is described in the following section.

In this integrative reading, Dooyeweerd's modal framework provides a philosophical basis for engaging local wisdom holistically, while Reformed theology provides a broader theological horizon that informs subsequent normative evaluation of cultural meaning. This perspective has important implications for Christian Religious Education, particularly in fostering pedagogical approaches that cultivate holistic formation, contextual sensitivity, and critical faith engagement within culturally plural settings (Glas, 2019; Nelson, 2021; Zosh et al., 2022).

## Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research design based on literature-based analysis and hermeneutic interpretation (Hasibuan, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2016) to explore the theological, philosophical, and educational implications of *Sigale-gale* in Batak Toba culture. This research is based on a critical review of peer-reviewed journal articles, theological texts, and recognized ethnographic works on *Sigale-gale* published between 2004 and 2025. This paper does not use primary ethnographic field research; therefore, the term ethnography is used strictly in a secondary and interpretive sense, referring to engagement with existing ethnographic studies. Instead of viewing culture as a neutral or purely descriptive object, this analysis interprets local cultural expressions as theological-social representations that reveal the orderly structure of created reality and the spiritual tensions that exist within the Batak Toba community.

Analytically, the research proceeds by situating *Sigale-gale* within the philosophical framework of Herman Dooyeweerd's modal aspects, alongside Reformed theological perspectives articulated by thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper and Albert Wolters, and contemporary scholarship on Batak Toba culture. *Sigale-gale* is examined across selected modal dimensions—historical, social, aesthetic, ethical, and pistis—to allow for a non-reductionist interpretation of its cultural and symbolic significance. This philosophical analysis is then integrated with a hermeneutical–theological reading informed by Reformed doctrines of *imago Dei*, common grace, and Christ's redemptive lordship over creation. Through this methodological process, the research develops a coherent interpretive framework for engaging local wisdom within the context of Christian Religious Education in culturally plural settings.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the qualitative, literature-based analysis, the findings of this research indicate three interconnected contributions. First, *Sigale-gale* can be understood as a theological–anthropological symbol that expresses human longing for continuity and meaning within the context of fallen creation. Second, this cultural symbol demonstrates pedagogical relevance for contextual Christian Religious Education by providing a framework through which faith and local wisdom may be engaged critically. Third, when interpreted through the doctrine of *imago Dei*, *Sigale-gale* offers a lens for re-examining patrilineal assumptions in ways that affirm human dignity while remaining attentive to cultural particularity.



Through an interdisciplinary engagement with Reformed theology, cultural anthropology, and philosophical analysis, *Sigale-gale* is reinterpreted not as an animistic relic, but as a culturally embedded symbol that can be critically engaged within Christian theological reflection. This analytical approach highlights the potential of local cultural expressions to function as dialogical spaces where Christian faith, cultural identity, and educational formation intersect within contemporary plural contexts.

### ***Sigale-gale*: Cultural Symbol and Theological Reflection in Batak Toba Local Wisdom**

The Batak Toba community is characterized by a strong patrilineal kinship system, where identity and social status are passed down through the male lineage (Marbun, 2006). Within this traditional structure, sons are not merely biological descendants but also heirs to the family name, inheritance rights, and the continuation of the family's existence within the traditional community. Minawati and Alamo (2022) emphasize that in the context of ritual performances, *Sigale-gale* reflects the philosophical and structural dimensions of the Batak Toba patrilineal social system, where the role of male children is vital in maintaining the continuity of the lineage, fulfilling kinship obligations, and practicing sacred and collective traditional customs. The absence of male descendants is therefore experienced not only as a personal loss but as a disruption of social and symbolic order. In this context, *Sigale-gale* emerges as a symbolic response to the absence of male heirs—through the representation of a doll that “replaces” the role of male children in funeral ceremonies. Additionally, *Sigale-gale* doll embodies the cultural values of the Batak Toba people, including kinship, lineage, social status, and wealth (Kencana, 2024).

The construction of the *Sigale-gale* doll is not merely artistic or aesthetic but involves a series of local religious rituals with profound cosmological meanings. The process begins with the selection of a large tree believed to possess certain spiritual energy, followed by a ritual to summon the spirits of ancestors, symbolic coloring using red (symbolizing courage or blood), white (purity or life), and black (death or mystery), and the presentation of *ulos sibolang*—a sacred cloth in Batak Toba tradition signifying the bond of life and the continuity of generations (Hutabarat, 2015). *Sigale-gale* is prepared for *manortor* (dancing) to the rhythm of *Gondang Sabangunan* in funeral ceremonies, as if the dolls were real representatives of boys who have passed away or were never born (Manany & Gulo, 2025).

From a cultural anthropological perspective, this local wisdom reflects how society addresses death through symbolic, communal, and ritualistic expressions. However, in Reformed theology, the ultimate answer to death lies not in dolls or traditional rituals but in Christ's resurrection, which secures true life and unshakable hope (1 Corinthians 15:20-22). *Sigale-gale* doll and Batak Toba cosmology provide an entry point for constructive dialogue between the Gospel and culture, enabling the reinterpretation of life and death's meaning—especially for a young boy—through the lens of God's truth, fostering a deeper understanding of hope and redemption.

*Sigale-gale* may be understood not merely as a cultural artifact, but as a socio-theological symbol that reflects existential concerns within particular ethnic communities. Within educational contexts, *Sigale-gale* functions as a public pedagogical medium, especially in cultural and touristic settings such as Tomok and Simanindo on Samosir Island, where local tradition is mediated to broader audiences. From a Reformed theological perspective, efforts to integrate culture, philosophy, and theology provide a framework for engaging local wisdom critically and constructively within specific cultural contexts. Rather than serving as the fulfillment of human longing, cultural symbols such as *Sigale-gale* can be interpreted as expressions that point beyond themselves, inviting theological reflection on human dignity,



continuity, and hope as articulated within the Christian narrative of creation, fall, and redemption.

### **Patrilineal Culture, and Theological Transformation in Batak Toba Society**

In 1861, the Rhenish Missionary Society (RMG), under the leadership of Ludwig Ingwer Nommensen, began evangelizing the inland Toba Batak with the support of local leaders and the Dutch colonial government (Aritonang, 2004). This mission led to the establishment of the *Huria Kristen Batak Protestan* (HKBP), rooted in Lutheran traditions, and contributed significantly to the advancement of education and healthcare through the founding of schools, a seminary, and medical facilities. These initiatives fostered social mobility, encouraged the modernization of customs, and reshaped Batak Toba cultural life (Siahaan, Rochwulaningsih, Sulistiyono, & Azhari, 2025).

One central theological teaching introduced by the mission was *imago Dei*—that all human beings, male and female alike, are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27). This principle implicitly challenges the Batak Toba’s patrilineal system, in which family identity, inheritance rights, and social legitimacy are passed exclusively through the male line. Within this structure, women often face restrictions in ritual and social roles, both in traditional and church contexts (Kroesbergen, 2014). From a Reformed theological perspective, which emphasizes the equality of human dignity before God, this teaching calls the church—both individually and corporately—to critically evaluate socio-cultural structures that do not align with biblical principles.

Despite this theological vision, the patrilineal system remains deeply embedded in Batak Toba society, including within the HKBP. This reflects a pattern of normative coexistence, where Batak Toba customs and Christianity operate side by side within social and ecclesiastical life. While these two value systems may at times reinforce one another, they also generate tensions and conflicts, especially in matters of gender roles, inheritance, and leadership (Nainggolan, 2020). The church thus finds itself in a critical position, navigating between the preservation of cultural identity and its transformation in light of the Gospel.

Encouragingly, some congregations demonstrate progressive movement toward applying the *imago Dei* in ways that affirm the dignity and contributions of women. In this process, the symbolic transformation from *Sigale-gale* (lifeless, mournful) to *Simangido* (high-spirited) represents redemption and new life in Christ, signifying victory over death. This theological shift has led certain churches, including the HKBP, to open leadership roles to women—as pastors, deacons, or preachers—while maintaining the clan structure as the social foundation of Batak Toba identity (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan, n.d.; Saragih, 2025). This creates an ongoing dialectical space in which Christian faith and traditional structures interact dynamically.

In the Reformed theological framework, informed by Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects, cultural dynamics must be assessed holistically. The social, historical, legal, and ethical dimensions of the patrilineal system are inseparable from the religious (*pistis*) aspect, which shapes how faith interprets and directs life. The church’s role is not to abolish culture but to filter and redeem it, allowing the Gospel to be a transformative light. This mission goes beyond gender issues, embracing the whole of creation—redeeming social systems and cultural symbols like *Sigale-gale*, rooted in patrilineal values—so they reflect the life, restoration, and hope found in Christ.



## A Dooyeweerdian Analysis of *Sigale-gale* in Batak Toba Culture

Herman Dooyeweerd's modal aspects theory provides a non-reductionist philosophical framework for interpreting cultural phenomena as structured fields of meaning rather than as isolated or neutral objects (Dooyeweerd, 1953; Basden, 2008). Within this perspective, reality is understood as God's creation, constituted by multiple irreducible yet interrelated aspects that together disclose the coherence of human life under the sovereignty of Christ (Glas, 2019).

Applied to *Sigale-gale*, this framework enables an integrated analysis across selected modal aspects that are central to its cultural function (Dooyeweerd, 1953; Basden, 2008; Glas, 2019). Historically, *Sigale-gale* emerged as a symbolic response to the absence of male heirs within Batak Toba society, reflecting efforts to preserve lineage continuity and communal identity. Socially, the doll reinforces clan relationships, honor, and social hierarchy, mediating communal bonds that extend beyond death. Aesthetically and symbolically, its carved form, ritual movement, and the use of red, white, and black—accompanied by *manortor* dance and *Gondang Sabangunan* music—render themes of life, death, and ancestral honor perceptible within ceremonial space. Religiously (pistis), *Sigale-gale* expresses belief in the spirit world, functioning as a culturally embedded medium through which the community articulates ancestral presence and transcendence.

From a Dooyeweerdian standpoint, *Sigale-gale* is thus not merely a cultural artifact but a symbolic configuration in which multiple aspects of human existence converge (Dooyeweerd, 1953; Basden, 2008; Glas, 2019). Recognizing these interrelated dimensions resists reductive interpretations and allows cultural meaning to be understood within the broader coherence of creation. For Christian religious education, this perspective provides a critical framework for engaging local culture with discernment—affirming its symbolic depth while situating it within a theological horizon shaped by creation, fall, and redemption. In this way, *Sigale-gale* becomes not only an expression of ethnic identity but also a reflective medium through which learners are invited to understand culture, faith, and human longing within the totality of God's created order.

## The Theological Reinterpretation and Educational Implications

In Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy of aspects, the transformation of *Sigale-gale* reflects a shift in the dominant modal aspects—from the religious and social to the aesthetic, economic, and educational. Such a shift is not value-neutral; therefore, Reformed Christian education must cultivate students' critical analytical skills and reflective faith, enabling them to assess and use cultural heritage responsibly amid globalization and secularization. Even in its secularized form, *Sigale-gale* retains theological potential as a redeemed cultural symbol, pointing to humanity's deepest longing for hope and restored relationship with the Creator (Dooyeweerd, 1955; Wolters, 1985; Glas, 2019; Nelson, 2021).

Historically, *Sigale-gale* served as a spiritual representation in Batak Toba burial rituals, embodying beliefs in ancestral presence and the continuity of life after death. However, with the spread of Christianity and modernization in Batak Toba Land, this mystical function underwent significant change. Today, *Sigale-gale* is primarily recognized as a tourist attraction and cultural performance, especially in Tomok and Simanindo on Samosir Island (Sinaga, 2018). This reflects the process of secularization, as described by Clifford Geertz (1973), where sacred objects transition toward aesthetic, educational, and commercial purposes.



Within the Batak church—such as the Huria Kristen Batak Protestan (HKBP), the Gereja Kristen Protestan Indonesia (GKPI), and the Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI)—mystical elements like *Sigale-gale* have been removed from Christian burial practices. Liturgies now focus on the biblical hope of resurrection and eternal life in Christ. Yet, *Sigale-gale* remains valued as an ethnic heritage and a marker of Toba Batak identity, illustrating an ongoing dialogue between Christian faith and indigenous wisdom. Rather than eradicating all traditional elements, the church redefines their meaning through the light of Scripture.

From a Reformed theological perspective, this transformation is not simply a loss of spiritual significance but a redemptive opportunity (Kuyper, 1931; Wolters, 1985; Dooyeweerd, 1955). Cultural objects once tied to beliefs incompatible with the Gospel can be reinterpreted within a biblical framework. In this sense, *Sigale-gale* can serve as an educational tool for cultural literacy and faith dialogue—not as a spiritual medium, but as a means to discuss themes of mortality, hope, and identity in Christ. Thus, the process of secularization does not signal the end of cultural relevance but opens the way for a renewed theological engagement that honors Christ as Lord over every aspect of creation.

### **Reformed Theological Engagement with *Sigale-gale* in Christian Religious Education**

Reformed theology affirms that all human beings are created in the image of the Triune God (*imago Dei*), providing an ontological basis for human dignity that transcends gender, ethnicity, and social status (Gen. 1:26-27). Within this theological framework, social structures and cultural practices may be critically examined in light of the Gospel, particularly where they risk reinforcing exclusionary or hierarchical patterns. This perspective offers a theological critique of patriarchal or marginalizing cultural formations, while also providing a basis for reflecting on cultural transformation within a Christ-centered horizon (Kuyper, 1998). Human dignity, from a Reformed standpoint, is thus understood not primarily in terms of traditional roles or communal status, but in relation to humanity's created and redeemed orientation toward God.

This framework is significant for interpreting cultural practices such as *Sigale-gale* within the Batak Toba tradition. Although historically embedded within animistic cosmology, *Sigale-gale* reflects a deep human concern with comfort, spiritual presence, and life beyond death. From a Reformed theological perspective, such expressions may be interpreted as culturally mediated articulations of human spiritual longing, which Calvin describes as *sensus divinitatis*—an innate orientation toward the transcendent (Calvin, 1559/2006). Rather than rejecting local wisdom outright, a Reformed approach engages it as a dialogical entry point for theological reflection, interpreting *Sigale-gale* not as a medium of ancestral presence but as a cultural expression of existential longing that invites critical engagement within the horizon of Christian hope, rather than fulfillment within the symbol itself.

Within Christian Religious Education, the affirmation of Christ's lordship over creation provides a theological rationale for engaging culture as an integral dimension of faith-based learning. Drawing on Kuyper's well-known assertion that no sphere of life lies outside Christ's sovereignty (Plantinga, 2002), this perspective challenges rigid separations between theology, education, and cultural practice. In this framework, cultural artifacts that were once regarded as profane may be approached as part of the created order subject to critical theological evaluation rather than exclusion. Accordingly, *Sigale-gale* can be engaged as an educational resource that facilitates dialogue between biblical narratives and cultural meaning, enabling learners to reflect on the relationship between faith, culture, and human life in a holistic manner.



From a cultural anthropological perspective, *Sigale-gale* may be understood as more than a ritual object, functioning as a social symbol that embodies values of family solidarity, ancestral respect, and aspirations for life's continuity. Within Batak Toba cosmology, death is perceived not as an absolute rupture but as a transition into a spiritual realm that remains relationally connected to the living. From a Christian theological standpoint, such cultural understandings invite dialogue with biblical narratives concerning death, hope, and resurrection, particularly as articulated in the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:20-26). In educational contexts, this intersection of cultural and biblical narratives offers a constructive space for fostering critical and contextual theological reflection, allowing learners to engage cultural meaning alongside Christian theological perspectives.

Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophical framework provides a rich, non-reductionist account of reality by attending to the irreducible modal dimensions of human experience. As Glas (2019) emphasizes, however, this framework is not intended to function as an exhaustive or self-sufficient explanatory system detached from concrete social practices. When applied to indigenous cultural expressions such as *Sigale-gale*, Dooyeweerd's modal theory must therefore be employed with critical discernment and methodological humility. Its categories emerge from a Reformational philosophical tradition and do not arise directly from Batak Toba cosmology, ritual life, or indigenous epistemologies. Consequently, the framework functions heuristically and orientationally, illuminating certain structural aspects of cultural meaning while remaining open to correction, supplementation, and recontextualization through anthropological insight and theological reflection attentive to lived cultural experience. Acknowledging this limitation, in line with Glas's practice-oriented reading of Dooyeweerd, prevents philosophical overreach and sustains a genuinely dialogical engagement between Reformed theology and local wisdom within Christian Religious Education.

In contemporary digital contexts, Christian Religious Education increasingly encounters learners who engage more readily with visual, narrative, and interactive forms of communication than with exclusively text-based formats. Within this setting, cultural materials such as *Sigale-gale* offer pedagogical possibilities for exploring theological narratives through media such as animation, augmented reality, or educational games. Framed carefully, such approaches may support reflective engagement with the biblical metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration (Frame, 2013), allowing theological concepts to be encountered through both cognitive and imaginative dimensions of learning.

From an educational perspective, the findings of this research suggest several implications for the development of culturally responsive approaches to Christian Religious Education. First, thematic engagement with local culture—such as the use of *Sigale-gale* as a case for reflecting on hope, death, and communal life—highlights the pedagogical value of situating theological reflection within concrete cultural narratives. Second, attention to cultural hermeneutics underscores the importance of interpretive frameworks that enable educators to assess cultural practices theologically without resorting to either uncritical affirmation or dismissive rejection. Third, consideration of contemporary learning environments points to the potential role of digitally mediated and creative forms of engagement in facilitating dialogical and participatory encounters between faith and everyday experience. Rather than functioning as prescriptive interventions, these implications arise from the non-reductionist and dialogical framework developed in this research, which approaches culture, faith, and education as interrelated dimensions of human formation.

Through this integrative framework, *Sigale-gale* may be understood not as a residual expression of superstition, but as a socio-theological symbol that provides a meaningful



point of engagement for contextual theological reflection. When approached through a holistic philosophical and theological lens, Christian Religious Education can offer a reflective space in which learners critically engage questions of faith, culture, and human meaning. In this way, local cultural heritage is not dismissed, but interpreted as part of the created order that continues to be evaluated, reoriented, and reimagined within broader theological horizons.

## Conclusion

*Sigale-gale* in Batak Toba culture is more than an aesthetic or mystical artifact; it is a socio-theological symbol expressing human responses to death, loss, and the desire for life's continuity. Using Herman Dooyeweerd's modal aspects, it can be viewed holistically through historical, social, aesthetic, and pistis dimensions as part of creation's structure. *Sigale-gale* embodies the human quest for meaning, relationships, and transcendent hope, which, though lacking special revelation, reflects the *sensus divinitatis* in Reformed theology. This perspective enables believers to recognize culture not merely as a human creation but as a theological sphere, where elements of God's general revelation can be discerned and transformed by the redemptive truth of the Gospel.

In the context of Christian Religious Education, the research of *Sigale-gale* opens up a space for dialogue between Christian faith and complex and dynamic local culture. This local wisdom can be used as a contextual and transformative learning medium, bringing together faith reflection and cultural narrative in a critical and redemptive way. The Church and Christian educators are called not only to teach doctrine dogmatically but also to help students read and interpret their culture as part of God's fallen creation awaiting restoration in Christ. *Sigale-gale* is no longer seen as a mystical symbol opposed to faith but as a pedagogical entry point for understanding the Gospel within the relevant socio-cultural context of society. Future studies may expand this framework through empirical classroom-based research or comparative studies with other Indonesian indigenous traditions to further assess the pedagogical effectiveness of culturally integrated Christian religious education.

This researcher recommends that Christian Religious Education integrate local cultures like *Sigale-gale* into the curriculum systematically and theologically. Educators should be trained in Reformed theology-based cultural hermeneutics to critically, creatively, and redemptively interpret cultural symbols. Digital tools such as visual media and interactive narratives can help connect younger generations with Gospel values in a contextual, engaging way. Such integration enhances the relevance of faith education in globalization while enabling the church to act as a culturally sensitive yet Christ-faithful agent of transformation. This approach preserves local heritage, deepens theological understanding, and bridges the gap between tradition and contemporary Christian witness. The critique of Batak Toba patrilineality through *imago Dei* is important, but it is a limitation of this study since it is far more theological as opposed to being socio-empirical. In addition women's voices and lived experiences are discussed only indirectly. Future research may therefore extend this research through socio-empirical investigations—such as qualitative interviews or ethnographic research—focusing on women's lived experiences within Batak Toba cultural and ecclesial contexts. Further studies could also explore classroom-based empirical research to assess the pedagogical impact of culturally integrated Christian Religious Education, as well as comparative analyses with other Indonesian indigenous traditions.



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