



From Folklore to Faith: Theological Reflections on Cultural Myths and Historical Memory in Indonesia

Rahman Malik*

Faculty of Social and Political Sciences
Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
Corresponding author: rmalik20@usu.ac.id
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0047-5121>

Teguh Agum Pratama

Faculty of Social Science, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6967-5950>

Andi Hakim Lubis

Faculty of Law, Universitas Medan Area, Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-9573-1100>



<https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.107.27>

Abstract

This research looks at the role of Indonesian folklore as a text of faith in contextual theology. The Dayak harvest festival and mangongkal holi selamatan, as well as legends and rituals such as Dewi Sri, Putri Hijau, Nyai Roro Kidul, Si Gale-gale, are the first sub-theme in the Dayak legend festival series. Analysis of data used the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model to identify themes, map meanings, and synthesize relationships between symbols, cultural memory, and social praxis. The theory of cultural symbols perceives myths and rituals as channels for religious communication. Meanwhile, the theory of cultural sacralisation explains how a dispute becomes a revelation space and public ethics space through communal action. The findings reveal three main results. Folklore is a living text of faith, which teaches about spiritual ecology, dignified sacrifice for the other, and loving care for sorrow. Moreover, social cohesion is supported through rituals of thankfulness, ancestor veneration, collective prayers, and other observances that allow for continuity of faith. A third implication of the synthesis of these two sources is that it leads to a contextual theology that is grounded and oriented towards ecological responsibility, gender justice, communal solidarity, and intergenerational relations. The output of this research contributes to the framework that binds narrative, ritual, and social impact which serves as the basis for articulating a theology. This finding will contribute to the global discussion on religion as lived experience, creating opportunities for faith education and preserving community culture.

Keywords: Folklore, Faith, Theological Reflections, Cultural Myths, Historical Memory

Introduction

Indonesia is a nation of extraordinary cultural and spiritual diversity. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (Badan Pusat Statistik) in 2023, there are more than 1,340 ethnic groups and around 718 regional languages spread across the archipelago (2023). This diversity not only results in linguistic and customary differences but also gives rise to thousands of forms of folklore, myths, and legends that serve as vessels for conveying moral values and worldviews. Within this context, folklore functions not merely as collective entertainment but as an existential symbol representing how Indonesians understand forces



greater than themselves (2022). In myths are preserved the spiritual modes of thought that predate formal religions and continue to influence how people interpret the meaning of faith.

The religious diversity that flourishes in Indonesia demonstrates that spirituality has never existed in a vacuum. Islam, Christianity, and other faiths have developed through interactions with older local cosmologies, so that religious practices in many regions still contain cultural elements inherited from the past (Liu, 2025). Harvest rituals, sea ceremonies, and ancestral reverence are expressions of faith born from awareness of humanity's dependence on the source of life. In this space, faith and custom do not conflict but instead interpret one another's meanings of sanctity, sacrifice, and justice (Okubo, 2025; Perko, 2023).

The oral traditions that emerged from long historical processes record how Indonesians have understood the divine presence without confining it within dogmatic systems. Tales such as *Dewi Sri*, *Putri Hijau*, *Si Gale-gale*, and *Nyai Roro Kidul* are not mere legends but metaphorical explanations of the relationship between humankind, nature, and the sacred. Their narrative structures imply an unwritten theological message: that human life, suffering, and sacrifice possess spiritual value leading to a deeper understanding of goodness and divinity. From this perspective, myth can be seen as a living reflection of faith existing beyond the walls of institutional religion (Salinas, 2024; Shamel, 2024; Stepanova, 2024).

The relationship between faith and culture in the Indonesian context has become an important field for contemporary theological reflection (Asmara, 2024; Lourdunathan, 2022). Amid global tendencies that separate theology from culture, Indonesian society instead demonstrates harmony in which faith grows from cultural roots. This suggests that revelation does not always descend from the heavens in textual form but also ascends from the earth through human experiences of living in communion with nature and one another. Therefore, reading folklore as a theological space means recognising that God's presence is found not only at the altar and in scripture but also within the stories told by ancestors.

Religious thought, which remains dominated by Western-oriented frameworks, often neglects the local potential that is rich in spirituality. Theology grounded in rational and normative structures has yet to fully address the needs of communities living within intimate relationships with culture and sacred symbols (Stump, 2025). Indonesia thus requires a theology that emerges from its own soil—one rooted in the lived faith of its people rather than merely reproducing doctrinal formulations from abroad. Within this context, reflection on folklore becomes essential, for it offers a new way of perceiving God through human narratives and concrete experiences (Ruengmak, 2024; Vuong et al., 2020).

Folklore and myths are not relics of the past; they remain alive in the collective memory of society and continue to shape the moral orientation of future generations (Baron, 2024; Sudjarwo, 2021; Zou & Priscilla, 2023). Oral traditions passed from one generation to another preserve the nation's spiritual consciousness, even as its forms of belief evolve. This continuity shows that folklore possesses a profound theological function: connecting humankind with the origins and purpose of life. Here, history, culture, and faith converge to express divine reflection rooted in social reality.

Cultural memory preserved through myth also forms the foundation of the nation's religious identity (Hoover, 2020; James, 2021; Surikova, 2023). Each inherited story contains not only moral lessons but also represents a way for communities to interpret transcendental experiences within their history. In folklore lies a system of symbols guiding humans to understand suffering, justice, and hope as part of their spiritual journey toward the divine. Thus, theological reflection on folklore does not merely uncover old tales but rereads how humanity writes its own spiritual history.

A theology grounded in folklore liberates faith from confinement within rigid dogma, allowing it to live amid human and cultural realities. Folktales, myths, and rituals become languages through which God is understood in symbols familiar to daily life. From this arises a contextual



theology that is grounded, humanistic, and ecological—a theology that perceives divine presence not only in worship spaces but also in everyday relations between humans, their community, and nature. Folklore thus opens a pathway toward an inclusive and civilised faith consciousness, in which cultural diversity itself becomes a visible expression of God’s work and a human responsibility to safeguard creation as part of spiritual devotion (Björkman, 2021; Pandanari, 2024).

The urgency of this entire reflection lies in the need to build a theology that truly speaks from Indonesia. Religious discourse has long tended to neglect the cultural roots that are the sources of people’s faith experience. Yet amid globalisation and identity crises, theology grounded in folklore and historical memory can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, between faith and culture. This approach not only affirms God’s existence in sacred spaces but also reveals His presence within the narratives, rituals, and memories that shape the nation’s identity.

Literature Review

This research rests on the understanding that culture and religion do not run separately but intertwine to shape how humans comprehend reality and the meaning of divinity. In the Indonesian context, faith grows in cultural soil enriched by traditions, rituals, and local symbols. The main objective of this study is to reveal how folklore and historical memory function not only as cultural heritage but also as means for communities to interpret the divine presence within their social lives. Two theories serve as the primary foundations for reading this relationship. The theory of cultural symbols explains that every cultural element—whether myth, ritual, or legend—is a form of communication of meaning that reflects a society’s spiritual worldview (Geertz, 1973).

Cultural symbols enable religion to be present in forms that can be understood and lived by local communities. The theory of cultural sacralisation complements this view by asserting that every culture possesses sacred potential, wherein divine values take shape within human traditions, actions, and collective narratives (Eliade, 1961). Through the integration of these two theories, this research positions Indonesian folklore as a bridge between the cultural and the divine—a religious expression that grows from the lived experience and spiritual awareness of the nation. In this section, the researcher critically compares several previous studies, including:

Petrov (2018) traced religious functions in Russian folk poetry using textual and contextual analysis of spiritual verses that contain stories of saints and pious figures. The results show that these texts serve as links between Orthodox Christian teachings and popular cultural expressions, producing a syncretic form between faith and folklore. Although both examine the interaction of religion and culture, Petrov’s research focuses on religious literary forms as people’s liturgical texts, whereas the present study develops a broader theological reflection—not only on texts but also on symbols, rituals, and cultural memory as sources for forming contextual theology.

Furthermore, Uddin, Alam, and Talukder (2025) employed an interpretive qualitative approach to analyse the role of folklore as a pedagogical tool in teaching the literary work *The Merchant of Venice*. Through narrative analysis and interviews with students, the study found that introducing local cultural values through folktales enhances cross-cultural awareness and strengthens moral understanding within educational contexts. Its focus lies on the didactic function of folklore in language and literature learning. The difference from the present research lies in orientation: Uddin’s study positions folklore as a learning instrument, whereas this research treats folklore as a space for theological reflection that uncovers faith consciousness and the spiritual meanings of Indonesian society.



The study by Vuong et al. (2020) used a method of conceptual analysis and a cross-disciplinary approach to examine the role of folktales in transmitting religious values that sometimes give rise to moral paradoxes such as falsehood or violence.

By studying various folktales from Asia and Europe, it found that religion, in the process of enculturation, can unintentionally preserve ambiguous values, indicating that folklore functions as an ambivalent medium between goodness and moral deviation. This differs from the focus of the present research because Vuong's study views folklore as a transmitter of moral distortion, whereas this research positions folklore as a transmitter of theological meaning—namely a means of cultural revelation that shapes understanding of faith rather than morality alone.

Zou and Priscilla (2023) examined folklore as a form of identity construction born from experiences of collective grief. Using a phenomenological approach and narrative analysis of folktales from postcolonial communities, the study shows that folklore functions as a mechanism of social healing through collective memory and expressions of sorrow framed by spiritual values. These results illustrate how emotional experience shapes solidarity and cultural identity. The present research differs in that it does not only regard folklore as a container for emotional identity but also as a basis for theological reflection on the divine presence within human suffering, love, and hope amid complex cultural realities.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach aimed at deeply understanding the theological meanings contained within Indonesian society's folklore and cultural memory (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2020; Takona, 2024). In essence however, this is a conceptual–interpretive qualitative study based on textual and secondary sources. This approach was chosen because the research focus does not lie in quantitative measurement but in interpreting the symbols, values, and religious messages implied in cultural texts. Descriptive qualitative inquiry enables the researcher to trace the living spiritual dimensions behind traditional narratives and to explain the conceptual relationship between culture and faith within the plural and dynamic context of Indonesian theology.

The data sources consisted of primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from main materials containing Indonesian folklore texts, myths, legends, and cultural narratives relevant to spiritual meaning and religious reflection. Secondary data include books, scholarly articles, journals of theology and cultural anthropology, and prior studies discussing folklore, cultural memory, and contextual theology (Baum, 2021). These two types of data complement each other to provide a comprehensive picture of folklore's position as a source of theological reflection. Data collection was carried out through a systematic literature study involving searching, critical reading, and thematic note-taking of various literature relevant to the research issues (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, comprising four main stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles et al., 2020). This analytical process was cyclical, with each stage potentially recurring according to interpretive needs concerning theological meaning. The researcher identified the main themes emerging from the literature review, then interpreted inter-theme relations to build a comprehensive reflective understanding. Although this study adopts Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's qualitative analytical framework, the research is entirely literature-based, with the model employed as an interpretive tool for organising, analysing, and synthesising textual and secondary data.

Data validity was tested through triangulation techniques encompassing sources, theories, and methods to ensure consistency and credibility of the analysis results (Flick, 2022). This



approach ensures that the interpretations produced are not merely subjective but are verified through diverse scholarly perspectives and reference sources.

Results and Analysis

Folklore as a Living Text of Faith

The spiritual life of Indonesian society has never stood apart from its own culture. Within every ritual, legend, and symbol passed down through generations lies a worldview that connects humanity with the divine. Folklore is not only a reflection of how communities perceive nature and life but also a living text of faith, experienced through language, narrative, and collective action.

Through an examination of oral traditions and folktales across regions, a consistent pattern emerges—revealing the interweaving of cultural belief and theological value. In folklore, Indonesians discover their own religious language—a language born from the soil, from lived experience, and from the spiritual relationship continually renewed in daily life.

Table 1. Folklore and Theological Values in Indonesian Cultural Traditions (Source: derived from Literature)

No	Cultural Aspect & Specific Folklore	Theological Values Identified
1	Legend of Dewi Sri (Java)	Awareness that fertility and life are divine gifts to be preserved; the emergence of spiritual responsibility toward nature.
2	Tale of Putri Hijau (North Sumatra)	Sacrifice and fidelity as expressions of submission to divine will and symbols of pure devotion.
3	Ritual of <i>Mangongkal Holi</i> (Batak Toba)	Spiritual connection between the material world and ancestral spirits as an affirmation of belief in eternal life.
4	<i>Selamatan</i> Tradition (Java and Madura)	Collective spiritual experience affirming unity, shared prayer, and awareness of divine presence within the community.
5	Legend of Nyai Roro Kidul (Southern Java)	Symbol of balance between power and sanctity, representing the feminine aspect of God in local culture.
6	Story of Si Gale-gale (North Sumatra)	Expression of love, loss, and acceptance reflecting God's presence in human sorrow.
7	Dayak Harvest Festival	Gratitude for nature's abundance as a living liturgy affirming humanity's spiritual bond with the Creator.

The narrative of *Dewi Sri* illustrates the ecological consciousness of Javanese communities who perceive nature as part of God's sacred creation. In every tale of rice and fertility, humans learn to recognise divine presence in the soil they cultivate. Reverence for *Dewi Sri* expresses faith in the source of life, where working the fields is seen as an act of worship to the Giver of Sustenance. Theologically, this represents *spiritual ecology*, affirming that God is present in the earth's fertility and that humans are called to preserve its balance (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2022).

The story of *Putri Hijau* in North Sumatra conveys spiritual lessons on loyalty and sacrifice as forms of surrender to divine will. In local theology, her refusal to compromise justice and dignity symbolises courageous faith. Her sacrifice embodies the concept of active faith—that devotion to truth is the truest worship, even when it entails suffering (Stump, 2025).

The *Mangongkal Holi* ritual among the Batak Toba reflects an understanding of the continuity between physical and spiritual existence. The act of exhuming ancestral bones is not merely



an expression of reverence but an acknowledgment that life transcends death. This tradition demonstrates the theological dimension of *communio sanctorum*—the spiritual unity between the living and the departed under divine providence (Lina & Wijanarko, 2022; Timbers & Hollenberger, 2022).

The *Selamatan* tradition of Java and Madura embodies collective religious experience. Communities gather, offer prayers, and share meals in an atmosphere imbued with sacred meaning. This togetherness manifests *social theology*—that divine presence is not only encountered individually but through interhuman relationships founded upon prayer and solidarity. Through *selamatan*, faith takes the form of hospitality and social openness that sustain communal fraternity.

The legend of *Nyai Roro Kidul* portrays a sacred feminine figure revered not for her mystical power alone but for symbolising the balance between strength and sanctity. The legend of Nyai Roro Kidul can be read not as an attribution of feminine divinity, but as a symbolic representation through which Javanese Muslim communities articulate moral balance, spiritual authority, and sanctity within a culturally embedded theological imagination. Theologically, she represents the feminine aspect of God—the creative and nurturing force. Her presence as guardian of harmony signifies that divinity manifests not only through masculinity but also through tenderness and compassion (Zakirov, 2022).

The tale of *Si Gale-gale* from North Sumatra depicts a father's love and grief for his deceased child. The wooden effigy carved in the child's likeness becomes a medium to express unbroken affection beyond death. Its theological essence lies in the awareness that human love mirrors God's eternal love. This folklore expresses faith through sorrow accepted with sincerity, affirming that suffering can also become a space of divine encounter.

The Dayak harvest festival is an act of gratitude for nature's abundance. In the symbolic offering of produce to guardian spirits lies an acknowledgment that all things originate from God. This ritual constitutes a living liturgy of nature, where each grain of rice, each dance, and each song becomes a prayer. Its theology underscores gratitude and balance as the foundations of humanity's relationship with the Creator (Indainanto et al., 2023).

Overall, these findings reveal that religion and culture in Indonesia are mutually animating. In light of the theory of cultural symbols, every story and ritual contains a symbolic language that enables humans to perceive the sacred within lived experience. Meanwhile, the theory of cultural sacralisation explains that culture serves as a vessel through which divine values take tangible form and can be experienced by the community.

Through folklore, theology finds a grounded foundation, while culture attains spiritual depth—guiding humanity to know God through the very fabric of life itself.

Cultural Memory and Theological Continuity

The theological values that emerge within Indonesian folklore do not end with the stories or legends passed down through generations; they continue to live as cultural memory that reinforces the community's spiritual awareness.

Traditions, rituals, and acts of reverence toward mythological figures serve as mediums through which faith is preserved and reinterpreted across time. In this space, culture becomes a means of theological renewal, while theology functions to sustain cultural meaning, keeping it rooted in noble spirituality. The acts of remembering, celebrating, and performing cultural symbols represent the manifestation of divine presence within the ongoing history of the Indonesian people.

Table 2. Cultural Values, Theological Continuity, and Social Implications in Indonesian Folklore (Source: derived from Literature)

No	Cultural Value (Specific Folklore)	Theological Continuity	Social Implications
1	Fertility and natural balance (<i>Dewi Sri</i> – Java)	Understanding that nature is a manifestation of God's creation to be protected as part of ecological faith.	Emergence of environmental awareness and ethical agricultural practices in rural communities.
2	Loyalty and sacrifice (<i>Putri Hijau</i> – North Sumatra)	Affirmation of sincerity and surrender to divine will.	Strengthening social morality through the respect for women's dignity and the value of justice.
3	Ancestral and generational bonds (<i>Mangongkal Holi</i> – Batak Toba)	Belief that ancestral spirits remain present through familial love and prayer, expressing faith in eternal life.	Preservation of extended family traditions and reverence for earlier generations.
4	Solidarity and togetherness (<i>Selamatan</i> – Java and Madura)	Divine presence believed to manifest through communal gatherings and collective prayer.	Continuation of <i>gotong royong</i> and interreligious, interethnic social solidarity.
5	Balance of power and sanctity (<i>Nyai Roro Kidul</i> – Southern Java)	Awareness that power and compassion are complementary aspects of divinity.	Formation of social ethics around gender harmony and respect for marine ecology.
6	Love and sincerity in loss (<i>Si Gale-gale</i> – North Sumatra)	Understanding suffering as a path to spiritual maturity and acceptance of divine will.	Development of empathy and emotional solidarity within local communities.
7	Gratitude and harmony of life (Dayak Harvest Festival)	Thanksgiving to God for the gift of life and natural abundance as a form of nature's liturgy.	Strengthening of indigenous communities in maintaining tradition, nature, and ecological spirituality.

The cultural value embedded in the legend of *Dewi Sri* continues to thrive through Javanese harvest traditions. Ceremonies such as *wiwit* or *slamatan tandur* serve as tangible expressions of faith in God as the source of life. Beneath these agrarian practices lies an ecological theology teaching that caring for the earth is part of spiritual devotion (Puglisi & Buitendag, 2022; Rumaney & Sriram, 2023). Through the acts of planting and giving thanks, communities renew the relationship between humanity and the Creator manifested through nature.

The tale of *Putri Hijau* embodies the continuity of a theology of sacrifice translated into social morality. The values of loyalty and feminine dignity are not only remembered through narrative but serve as moral foundations for self-respect and integrity. In the modern social context, these values inform struggles for equality and justice, affirming that sacrifice does not always equate to suffering but represents steadfast faith in truth.

The *Mangongkal Holi* ritual demonstrates how belief in the continuity of life is sustained through collective familial memory. In this ceremony, faith in eternal life is concretely enacted through honouring the ancestors. This tradition reinforces a theological understanding that love transcends death. Such spiritual continuity fosters social structures that uphold family values, obedience, and intergenerational responsibility.



The *Selamatan* tradition symbolises how the theology of divine presence continues to live amid Indonesia's plural society. Communal prayers held in an atmosphere of fellowship signify not only piety but the realisation of God's presence among people. This practice nurtures interreligious and interethnic social solidarity. Within this space, spirituality becomes a social bridge that cultivates peace, cooperation, and togetherness as integral parts of everyday religious experience (Avalokitresvari & Paul, 2025; Resane, 2021).

The legend of *Nyai Roro Kidul* affirms the community's understanding of cosmic harmony and spiritual balance. Awareness of the sea's sacred power as an entity to be honoured expresses faith in divine authority manifested through nature. This reverence forms social values of equality, balance, and respect toward feminine power as an essential dimension of spiritual order.

The story of *Si Gale-gale* demonstrates how suffering and loss are not perceived as curses but as pathways to faith formation. The dancing wooden effigy becomes a symbol of enduring love transformed into remembrance that sustains hope. In social life, this value manifests as empathy and solidarity with others, especially in moments of grief and loss. Faith is thus embodied through tangible acts of love rather than abstract belief.

The Dayak harvest festival represents theological continuity through gratitude toward God. By ritually expressing thanks for nature's yield, communities affirm divine presence within creation. This spirituality carries ecological implications, encouraging forest preservation and environmentally respectful practices. The tradition reveals a theology intertwined with ecology—where the continuity of faith implies the continuity of life itself (Resane, 2024).

Collectively, the values transmitted through folklore show that cultural memory does not merely preserve the past but sustains faith in dynamic forms. Through the lens of cultural symbolism, every act, story, and ritual constitutes a spiritual language enabling humanity to encounter the divine through symbol and action.

Meanwhile, the theory of cultural sacralisation asserts that culture itself can serve as a locus of revelation, where divine values incarnate within human traditions, rituals, and solidarities. Theological continuity in Indonesian folklore thus demonstrates that faith is not merely inherited belief but a living experience continually renewed through memory, practice, and social life.

The Emergence of Contextual Theology in Indonesian Culture

The transformation of faith within Indonesian society demonstrates that theology does not grow solely from spaces of worship but also from the culture that lives among the people. In daily life, traditions, and local narratives, communities learn to recognise God's presence through symbols intimately connected to their lived realities. Through inherited folklore, people construct a distinctive, grounded spiritual worldview, one that does not depend on abstract Western theological systems. Theology arises not from speculation but from experience—from the soil that is tilled, from the stories that are told, and from the rituals that are celebrated together. Culture, therefore, is not merely a context for theology but the womb in which theology itself is born.

In the context of the findings presented in this section, contextual theology is understood as the interpretation of theological meaning as it emerges from concrete cultural practices and lived religious experiences. The concept of a living text of faith refers to folklore, rituals, and narratives that function as dynamic carriers of religious meaning rather than static cultural artefacts. Cultural sacralisation denotes the process through which cultural symbols and practices acquire sacred significance within communal belief systems, while historical memory refers to the collective remembrance through which past narratives are continually reactivated to shape moral values, identity, and public ethics in the present.

Folklore is not just a record of what people once believed or even practiced. It is essentially an active and living medium through which meaning, belief, and spirituality are derived and continue to develop. Cultural memory does not merely help to keep the past, it challenges the idea that traditions are static relics. Folklore—through myths, legends, songs, rituals, and customs—are what keeps shared experiences alive by adapting them to new contexts. As societies change, the stories and practices also align, allowing beliefs to remain important. In this way, folklore preserves one's faith in dynamic ways, so that ultimately that spiritual ideas endure not by fighting change but by transforming as required alongside human experiences.

The notion that language permits humanity to meet the divine through symbol and action suggests that spiritual understanding is not only intellectual. Engagement with folklore thus allows people to experience a sense of the sacredness through their lived practices. So, folklore is the a bridge between past and present, and also the human and divine and it keeps faith alive by expressing it through changing symbols, stories that are shared, and actions that have deep meaning.

Table 3. The Emergence of Contextual Theology within Indonesian Culture (Source: derived from literature)

No	Cultural Manifestation / Folklore	Direction of Emerging Contextual Theology	Impact on Social Spirituality
1	<i>Dewi Sri</i> – symbol of fertility and nature	Ecological theology: faith understood as responsibility for creation	Emergence of spiritual awareness towards nature and sustainable agricultural ethics
2	<i>Putri Hijau</i> – tale of sacrifice and justice	Ethical theology: faith as fidelity to truth and human dignity	Reinforcement of justice and the appreciation of women's worth
3	<i>Mangongkal Holi</i> – ancestral reverence	Relational theology: faith connecting the past, present, and eternity	Reverence for ancestors and intergenerational familial solidarity
4	<i>Selamatan</i> – spiritual togetherness	Social theology: divine presence in fellowship and collective prayer	Interreligious and interethnic solidarity as an expression of open faith
5	<i>Nyai Roro Kidul</i> – balance of power and compassion	Feminist-cosmic theology: awareness of divine duality in strength and tenderness	Greater respect for the feminine dimension of spirituality
6	<i>Si Gale-gale</i> – love and suffering	Theology of love: suffering as the path to spiritual maturity	Empathy, compassion, and solidarity with others
7	Dayak Harvest Festival – gratitude for life	Theology of nature's liturgy: faith embodied in thanksgiving and harmony with the earth	Strengthening ecological spirituality and indigenous communal unity

The values born from Indonesian folklore reveal a theological shift from verbal formulation to lived praxis. *Dewi Sri*, for instance, embodies ecological awareness that gives rise to ecological theology—a mode of faith affirming that caring for the environment is an act of worship toward the Creator. *Putri Hijau* expresses an ethical theology in which loyalty and sacrifice form the moral foundation of faith that upholds justice. Both illustrate that Indonesian faith emerges from labour, sacrifice, and connection with nature rather than from dogma detached from reality (Ib et al., 2024; Sukatman, 2024; Suwandi, 2025).

Mangongkal Holi manifests a relational theology, where spiritual life is understood not as an individual possession but as a network of love binding generations. Through this ritual, faith



becomes a continuous relationship affirming divine presence between the past and the present. *Selamatan*, on the other hand, reflects social theology—showing that God dwells within human fellowship. Togetherness, prayer, and shared meals constitute a people's liturgy, demonstrating fraternity as an essential element of faith.

The legend of *Nyai Roro Kidul* opens a space for feminist and cosmic theological interpretation. This story teaches the balance between strength and compassion, between the firm and the gentle, between the masculine and the feminine as representations of divine wholeness (Lomax, 2023; Ursic, 2021). In the modern social context, such a narrative underpins appreciation for women's roles in spirituality and awareness of the cosmic harmony that humanity must preserve.

The tale of *Si Gale-gale* affirms a theology of love, in which suffering and loss become paths to faith maturity. Love that endures beyond death teaches that God is present even in sorrow. Meanwhile, the Dayak harvest festival embodies a theology of natural liturgy, where faith is expressed through gratitude for life. In this tradition, nature becomes the altar, and human action becomes prayer.

Overall, these findings affirm that Indonesian contextual theology arises not from imitation of Western frameworks but from the human struggle with culture, land, and history itself. In light of the theory of cultural symbols, all folklore and ritual become a living theological language—a way for people to converse with God through signs they understand. Meanwhile, the theory of cultural sacralisation indicates that culture itself may serve as a medium of revelation, a locus where God manifests within human work, relationships, and consciousness. Thus, the emergence of contextual theology in Indonesia marks the convergence of faith and culture, giving birth to a spirituality that is grounded, reflective, and authentic—a theology born of the soil and returning to enliven humanity.

Discussion

The interwoven experience of faith within Indonesian folklore reveals patterns that align with global discourses on the relationship between religion and culture (Hati et al., 2023). Across the world, local traditions function as anchors of spirituality for communities in transition, and the present findings display a similar configuration: stories, rituals, and collective memories serve as accessible religious languages, continuously re-narrated across generations. Ecological awareness in fertility narratives, social solidarity in communal rituals, and the inter-world connection between the living and the ancestors resonate with global movements that position religion as a source of public ethics and ecological care. The Indonesian context adds distinctive island, agrarian, and multireligious dimensions that enrich the international dialogue on how faith can grow organically from a culture's own soil.

The dynamics of faith continuity through cultural memory echo global discussions of *religion as lived experience* (Zou & Priscilla, 2023). In many societies, faith endures not primarily through dogma but through habits, celebrations, and shared stories. Our findings affirm that belief in divine presence is expressed through daily rhythms: harvests, communal prayers, ancestral reverence, and human-nature relations. Indonesia's contextual contribution lies in how local symbols cultivate ethics of balance, justice, and compassion—not remaining as discourse, but embodied in cohesive social practices.

The convergence of narrative and ritual in the Indonesian case also engages with the global discourse on theological decolonisation. Rather than relying on categories shaped by Western traditions, this interpretation shows that communities derive theology from their own cultural experiences. Fertility is read as divine stewardship of creation, sacrifice as moral integrity, and ancestral relationships as continuity of love. This perspective opens a two-way exchange:



Indonesia contributes themes and symbols, while global theology offers conceptual frameworks that broaden interpretive reach.

The framework of the theory of cultural symbols helps structure the findings beyond descriptive folklore (Geertz, 1973). Symbols are understood as media of meaning that allow the sacred to be recognised through signs familiar to the community (Tucker, 2021; Vuong et al., 2020). The narratives of *Dewi Sri*, *Putri Hijau*, and other sacred female figures demonstrate symbolic operations binding emotion, memory, and action, so that faith becomes something simultaneously felt, thought, and enacted. Such interpretation illustrates that theology can be articulated through local symbolic maps without losing its universal horizon.

The theory of cultural sacralisation (Eliade, 1961) deepens this argument by showing how social action itself can become a space of revelation. *Selamatan*, *Mangongkal Holi*, harvest festivals, and local reconciliation rituals demonstrate processes in which divine values materialise as frameworks for communal life. Sacredness extends beyond the altar to the communal table, cultivated fields, and shared spaces of mourning. This perspective emphasises that contextual theology emerging in Indonesia possesses a strong practical orientation because it is sustained through actions that are both repeated and remembered. For example, this practical orientation is evident in recurring public rituals, communal festivals, and folklore performances that are repeatedly enacted and collectively remembered as expressions of lived faith in everyday social life.

Dialogue with Petrov's (2018) research situates our results beyond the boundaries of specific religious literature. While Petrov focused on folk religious verses and Orthodox syncretism in textual form, this study expands the scope to include symbols, rituals, and memories—broadening the theological horizon from literary genres to social praxis. Comparison with the study of Uddin and colleagues (2025) clarifies a difference in orientation: whereas folklore there functions as a pedagogical tool for cultural awareness, in this research it becomes a medium of faith articulation that shapes ecological ethics, social solidarity, and a communal eschatological horizon.

Engagement with Vuong et al. (2020) reveals a mutually testing trajectory. While folktales may contain moral ambivalence, contextual theological interpretation demonstrates the possibility of reorienting symbols toward public good through memory, ritual, and the practice of justice. The relation to Zou and Priscilla's (2023) study enriches the affective dimension: folklore as an expression of identity born from collective grief resonates strongly with our narratives of love, loss, and hope, further deepened into a theological horizon affirming divine presence in restoration and social reconciliation.

The principal novelty of this study lies in its three-layered synthesis, rarely articulated together: first, mapping theological values emerging from specific Indonesian folklore; second, tracing the continuity of faith through cultural memory embodied in rituals and social acts; and third, articulating the trajectory of contextual theology rooted in local symbols yet impacting ecological ethics, gender justice, communal solidarity, and intergenerational relationships. The interrelation of narrative, ritual, and praxis produces a grounded and dialogical theological model, expanding the horizons of religious and cultural studies with a distinctively Indonesian voice that can enter global academic conversation.

Conclusion

This research concludes that Indonesian folklore is the living text of faith, where symbols, rituals, and collective memory generate lasting theological justification in the social life. The narratives of *Dewi Sri*, *Putri Hijau*, *Mangongkal Holi*, *Selamatan*, *Nyai Roro Kidul*, *Si Gale-gale*, and *Dayak* harvest festival, show an integral amalgamation among ecological consciousness; sacrificial ethic; inter-generational relationship; communal solidarity; cosmic balance; and a horizon of love which gives meaning to suffering. The connection between these three layers of analysis shows how a theological continuity begins with cultural symbols,



works itself through social memory, and moves toward grounded contextual theology. The importance of this contribution is basically more on moving the discussion from cultural description to the description of theology that can arise from the lived experience of the people so that Indonesian theology has autonomy and communicative character at the global academic level.

Recommendations are directed toward two complementary domains. Future research should include different regions and communities through comparative cross-ethnic design. The research design should include in-depth literature review, participant ethnography, multimodal documentation and digital memory tracing to examine the negotiation of traditional symbols in new spaces. On the development side, theology-based modules which are based on local culture will have to be designed to strengthen faith education. Likewise, ecological ethics and gender justice, derived from local symbols will have to be mainstreamed. Groups like custom, education, and religion need to work together to keep tradition alive in young people's mind as a relevant realm of revelation. Taking a measured approach towards validity and sustainability will hopefully maintain a balance between heritage preservation and theological renewal responsiveness to the current challenge.

References

(BPS), B. P. S. (2023). *Statistik Kebudayaan 2023: Keberagaman Etnis dan Bahasa di Indonesia*. Badan Pusat Statistik Republik Indonesia. Available online at <https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2023/12/20/statistik-kebudayaan-2023.html>

Asmara, A. H. D. (2024). The Implementation of Religious Moderation in Jesuit High Schools in Indonesia: Catholic Religious Education Teachers' Perspectives. In *Proceedings of The International Conference on Theology, Religion, Culture, and Humanities* (Vol. 1, Nomor 2, hal. 175–191). Sanata Dharma University. <https://doi.org/10.24071/tic.v1i2.8874>

Avalokitesvari, N. N. A. N., & Paul, S. (2025). Fides quaerens intellectum, hindu divine philosophy and its relevance to religious moderation in Indonesia. In *Life and Death: Journal of Eschatology* (Vol. 2, Nomor 2). Institute for Advanced Science, Social, and Sustainable Future. <https://doi.org/10.61511/lad.v2i2.2025.1258>

Baron, R. (2024). Salons 2: Public Folklore, Heritage, and Social Justice. *Journal of American Folklore*, 137(543), 102–110. <https://doi.org/10.5406/15351882.137.543.09>

Baum, S. (2021). *Research Questions and Research Design*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-1677-8_2

Björkman, J. (2021). The Spirit of the Place and the Place of the Spirit: Local Spirits, Boundaries, and Social Order in Southwest Finnish Folklore. *Temenos*, 57(2), 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.33356/temenos.95379>

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. J. (2022). Research design - international student edition: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. In *Research design - international student edition : qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*.

Edmonds, W. A., & Kennedy, T. D. (2020). An Applied Guide to Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods. In *An Applied Guide to Research Designs: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802779>

Eliade, M. (1961). *Religion and Culture: An Anthropological Approach*. University of Chicago Press.

Flick, U. (2022). Revitalising Triangulation for Designing Multi-perspective Qualitative Research. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Design*.



<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529770278.n40>

Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.

Hati, L. P., Al-Mujtahid, N. M., Kholil, S., Sahfutra, S. A., Ginting, L. D. C. U., & Fahreza, I. (2023). Religious Harmony Forum: Ideal Religious Moderation in the Frame of Building Tolerance in Medan City, Indonesia. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 104(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.420>

Hoover, S. M. (2020). Myth “Today”: Reading Religion Into Research on Mediated Cultural Politics. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 4508–4532. <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?partnerID=HzOxMe3b&scp=85099433173&origin=inward>

Ib, B. A., Huriyati, E., Susetyowati, & Dewi, F. S. T. (2024). Cultural Perception And Myths Of Maternal And Infant Health Related To Stunting In Aceh Tengah Regency, Indonesia And The Opportunity For Intervention. *Malaysian Journal of Public Health Medicine*, 24(2), 284–292.

Indainanto, Y. I., Dalimunthe, M. A., Sazali, H., Rubino, & Kholil, S. (2023). Islamic Communication in Voicing Religious Moderation as an Effort to Prevent Conflicts of Differences in Beliefs. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 104(4). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.104.415>

James, P. (2021). The myth of faust, “titanism”, and the religious topic of the selling of the soul in the cultural writings of jan patočka. *Religions*, 12(7). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070528>

Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi, K. (2022). *Atlas Cerita Rakyat Nusantara*. Direktorat Jenderal Kebudayaan, Kemendikbudristek. <https://kebudayaan.kemdikbud.go.id>

Lina, P., & Wijanarko, R. (2022). Faith In God as The Source of Goodness And Religious Moderation In Indonesia: A Christian Moral Perspective. In *International Journal of Indonesian Philosophy & Theology* (Vol. 3, Nomor 1, hal. 40–52). Asosiasi Filsafat Teologi Indonesia dan Asosiasi Ahli Filsafat Keilahian Indonesia. <https://doi.org/10.47043/ijipth.v3i1.24>

Liu, Y. (2025). A Cosmopolitan Writing of Irishness: On the Tactics in Colm Tóibín’s Cultural Adaptation of the Classical Myths. *Waiguo Yuyan Yu Wenhua*, 9(1), 23–36. <https://doi.org/10.19967/j.cnki.flc.2025.01.003>

Lomax, T. (2023). A Black Feminist Study of Religion: Inheriting Victor Anderson’s Black Religious and Cultural Criticism. *Black Theology*, 21(1), 8–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2023.2180135>

Lourdunathan, A. C. (2022). Intercultural Theology Competence for an Intercultural Faith Education. *Religions*, 13(9). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090806>

Miles, M. B., Huberman, M., & Saldana, J. (2020). Qualitative Data Analysis-A Methods Sourcebook -4th edition. In *SAGE* (Vol. 53, Nomor 9).

Okubo, K. (2025). Cultural myth vs systemic failure: Why Japan’s deceased organ donation rate remains stagnant. *American Journal of Transplantation*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajt.2025.07.2467>

Pandanari, D. S. (2024). Religious, Ghost, and Spiritual Concepts of Society in Folklore Horror Film in Indonesia. In *Proceedings of International Conference on Research in Education and Science* (Vol. 10, Nomor 1, hal. 1227–1236). <https://www.scopus.com/inward/record.uri?partnerID=HzOxMe3b&scp=85217649567&origin=inward>

Perko, V. (2023). Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Using Myths and Fairy Tales. *Ars Et Humanitas*, 17(1), 215–228. <https://doi.org/10.4312/ars.17.1.215-228>



Puglisi, A., & Buitendag, J. (2022). A faith-based environmental approach for people and the planet: Some inter-religious perspectives on our Earth-embeddedness. *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 78(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7582>

Resane, K. T. (2021). Theology and culture in dialogue towards harmonious multi-religious and multi-cultural South Africa. *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, 55(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2764>

Resane, K. T. (2024). Black Consciousness and Black Theology: Di ya thoteng di bapile (relationship for liberation). *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 80(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9001>

Ruengmak, A. (2024). The emergence of the 'Ai Khai' worship and the social revival in post-COVID-19 southern Thailand: the interplay between local folklore and sacred tourism. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2313845>

Rumaney, H., & Sriram, S. (2023). Not Without My Hijab: Experiences of Veiled Muslim Women in India. *Human Arenas*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-021-00193-3>

Salinas, V. C. (2024). Introduction. Biblical Myths and Judeo-Christian Theology in Hispanic American Literature since the 20th Century. In *Mitologias Hoy* (Vol. 30, hal. 1–3). <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/mitologias.1092>

Shamel, A. (2024). Theology and the Mythic Sensibility: Human Myth-Making and Divine Creativity. In *Theology and the Mythic Sensibility Human Myth Making and Divine Creativity*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009542593>

Stepanova, E. S. (2024). Semantics of the Birth Myth as a Cultural Code. *Rudn Journal of Language Studies Semiotics and Semantics*, 15(1), 292–304. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2299-2024-15-1-292-304>

Stump, J. (2025). The Sacred Chain: How Understanding Evolution Leads to Deeper Faith. In *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*. <https://doi.org/10.56315/psc6-25stump>

Sudjarwo. (2021). Values folklore in West Lampung Indonesia. In *Folklor Edebiyat* (Vol. 27, Nomor 106, hal. 597–608). <https://doi.org/10.22559/folklor.1633>

Sukatman. (2024). Garuda myth-based toponym as a portrait of Indonesian cultural activities in the Solon years. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2299533>

Surikova, O. D. (2023). From Name to Myth (Based on Russian Cultural and Literary Tradition). *Religions*, 14(11). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111412>

Suwandi, S. (2025). Human-Environmental Relations as Manifested in Central Java Folklore of Indonesia. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 15(7), 2366–2376. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tppls.1507.29>

Takona, J. P. (2024). Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches / sixth edition. In *Quality and Quantity* (Vol. 58, Nomor 1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-023-01798-2>

Timbers, V. L., & Hollenberger, J. C. (2022). Christian Mindfulness and Mental Health: Coping through Sacred Traditions and Embodied Awareness. *Religions*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010062>

Tucker, E. (2021). Cyberpl@y: Communicating Online; Folklore and Social media: by Brenda Danet, Oxford and New York, Berg, 2001. edited by Andrew Peck and Trevor J. Blank, Louisville, University Press of Colorado, 2020. In *International Journal of Play* (Vol. 10, Nomor 3, hal. 331–332). <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2021.1959233>



Ursic, E. (2021). Sonic Metaphors: Music, Sound, and Ecofeminist Theology. *Feminist Theology*, 29(3), 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09667350211000606>

Vuong, Q.-H., Ho, M.-T., Nguyen, H.-K. T., Vuong, T.-T., Tran, T., Hoang, K.-L., Vu, T.-H., Hoang, P.-H., Nguyen, M.-H., Ho, M.-T., & La, V.-P. (2020). On how religions could accidentally incite lies and violence: folktales as a cultural transmitter. *Palgrave Communications*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-0442-3>

Zakirov, A. A. (2022). F. Isac's Qur'anic Hermeneutics in Context of Islamic Liberation Theology. *Islam in the modern world*, 17(4). <https://doi.org/10.22311/2074-1529-2021-17-4-63-78>

Zou, P. H., & Priscilla, B. E. (2023). Folklore: An identity born of shared grief. *Cogent Arts and Humanities*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2249279>

Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



This article is open-access and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence CC BY: credit must be given to the creator, the title and the license the work is under. This license enables re-users to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator.