




Mission and inculturation: Preserving local language and culture in the Indonesian Church

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Dates:

Received: 17 Jan. 2025
 Accepted: 07 Mar. 2025
 Published: 30 Apr. 2025

How to cite this article:

Widyawati, F., Lon, Y.S. & Midun, H., 2025, 'Mission and inculturation: Preserving local language and culture in the Indonesian Church', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10516. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10516>

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This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of the Indonesian Catholic Church in preserving local languages and cultures within the Asian context. Utilising a socio-historical approach, the research delves into the evolution of the Church's mission from a pragmatic need for communication with local communities to a systematic effort to integrate local values into religious practices. The Church's adoption of inculturation facilitates deeper dialogue between the Catholic faith and local cultures, actively contributing to the preservation of community languages and traditions. The study identifies numerous concrete efforts by the Church in cultural preservation, such as transliteration, translation, research, documentation and extensive linguistic studies. Additionally, the establishment of dedicated institutions and study centres, alongside the involvement of educational institutions such as Catholic universities and schools, further underscores the Church's commitment to promoting and safeguarding the richness of local cultures.

Contribution: The findings highlight the multifaceted contributions of the Indonesian Catholic Church in fostering cultural heritage and supporting national development through its dedicated efforts in language and cultural preservation. Furthermore, this article significantly enhances the understanding of the mission and inculturation practices of the Catholic Church within the Asian context.

Keywords: Catholic Church; Indonesia; inculturation; local language; cultural preservation.

Introduction

Language plays a pivotal role in the Church's mission. Saint Paul emphasised that it is impossible to believe without preaching, 'How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?' (Rm 10:14). Furthermore, he said that 'but if I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me' (1 Cor 14:11). Therefore, it is imperative that the Church's mission is communicated in the local language to ensure understanding. Learning the local language is essential for understanding a community's culture, facilitating personal adaptation and building meaningful relationships. Those who fail to learn the language face integration challenges, potentially jeopardising their mission (Blankenship 2016:112–113; Welmers 2017; Wright, 1980:202–202). Language fosters interaction and friendships, making ministry more meaningful.

Missionaries working outside their native regions often prioritise learning the local language, recognising it as a critical activity (Henrichsen 1999; Kirby 1995; Pennycook & Makoni 2005). Numerous mission studies highlight the difficulties missionaries encounter in this endeavour, noting that language learning challenges can impede mission work (Deer 1975:87–88;). Earlier research, such as that by Sebeok and Saltzman (1951:10–11) and Wright (1980), provides strategies for missionaries to learn languages effectively. Missionaries who do not engage with the local language and culture risk establishing 'transplanted churches', which remain alien and disconnected from the local context (Van Rheenen 2023).

Mastery of the local language is crucial for presenting the gospel in a culturally relevant and deeply rooted manner. Contextual and transformative missions are only achievable when missionaries engage with the local language, culture and community issues (Bosch 2011; Driskill 2019; Gittins 2015). Without this engagement, the Church risks being perceived as an alien institution. Consequently, the themes of contextualisation and inculturation are essential to the Church's mission work, irrespective of location (Orta 2016; Phan 2022).

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Research indicates that missionaries who initially learned local languages facilitated the Church's efforts in preserving and documenting these languages for academic and social purposes. This initiative led to the establishment of a linguistic and cultural mission within the Church, particularly impactful in regions such as Africa (Mbenzi 2019; Pawlikova-Vilhanova 2011), Asia (King 2004), the Amazon (Epps 2005), Spain (Zwartjes 2014) and Australia (Muscat 2024). The Church has become a centre for cultural and linguistic studies, with its academic research serving as a valuable reference in the fields of science and culture.

The mission related to language and culture, while controversial, remains highly relevant in the Church's interactions with local communities (Gilmour 2007; Lewis 2001). Criticisms of the Church's role in eradicating local culture and language are an undeniable phenomenon in Christian missions worldwide (Yazzie 2003). Furthermore, the historical relationship between missions and colonialism, which fosters cultural hegemony, cannot be ignored (Peterson 1997; Samson 2021). However, this mission is crucial, particularly in contexts where local languages and cultures face extinction and there are no other institutions dedicated to their maintenance, documentation and academic study.

The existing body of research on the Catholic Church's role in preserving local languages and cultures in Southeast Asia is relatively sparse. This study addresses this gap by highlighting a notable example of best practices undertaken by the Catholic Church in Indonesia. As a minority religion in Asia, Catholicism deserves more comprehensive examination, particularly in Indonesia, where the Church has made substantial contributions despite being a minority in the world's largest Muslim-majority nation. This research examines the Catholic Church in Flores, Eastern Indonesia, and its century-long contribution to preserving and promoting local languages and cultures. Initially, European missionaries played a pivotal role by learning and documenting local languages, both orally and in writing, for the Church's internal use and the study of language and culture. These efforts were closely linked to the Church's inculturation programme, which aims to integrate religion with local culture. Inculturation involves incorporating local languages, symbols and cultural attributes into the Church's liturgy, theology and pastoral work, thereby enhancing the status and respect for local languages and cultures.

Beyond the Church's internal interests, systematic efforts to research, utilise, produce and document local languages and cultures have been institutionalised in Church-affiliated schools, universities and pastoral centres. These initiatives, initially led by foreign missionaries and later continued by the local Church, have established the Church as a hub for the study and preservation of local languages and cultures. Church agents have become both academic and practical advocates in this field, significantly contributing to the cultural and linguistic landscape of the region.

In the Indonesian context, the mission of inculturation and systematic academic efforts to preserve local languages are crucial, given the insufficient efforts from national and local governments to develop and protect these aspects. This contribution is significant, particularly in Indonesia, where concerns arise that other religious movements might negatively impact local cultures and languages. Studies indicate that movements promoting Arabism, the Arabic language and culture, or religious purification pose a threat to local cultures (Al Qurtuby 2017; Budiwanti 2014; Hasan 2009). Furthermore, language policies that do not prioritise local languages are also a concern in Indonesia (Arka 2013; Rahmi 2015; Zein 2020). The Church's role in preserving local languages and cultures is highly valued and plays a pivotal role in safeguarding the nation's cultural heritage.

This study employs socio-historical methods to explore and analyse the role of the Church over the past century, focussing on the Catholic Church in West Flores, Eastern Indonesia, a region known as the 'Catholic Island'. The island is in East Nusa Tenggara Province, the only province in Indonesia with Catholics in the majority. More than 35% (3013820) of Indonesian Catholics reside in this region. In Flores, 87% of the population is Catholics. Webb (1986) remarked that 'The people of Flores live on an island where even the rocks, wood, and birds are Catholics'. The Church quickly established itself in the hearts of the people and experienced significant growth. This success is attributable to the Church's integration into local culture, extending beyond its religious mission. The Church has become a pivotal institution, contributing to the development of education, healthcare, housing, infrastructure, drinking water and various charitable social initiatives, including the preservation of local languages and cultures. This article provides a comprehensive examination of the Catholic Church and its relationship with local languages and cultures in Indonesia.

National overview: Christianity and language in Indonesia

Indonesia, located in Southeast Asia, currently holds the distinction of having the largest Muslim population in the world. According to the Central Statistics Agency, the population of Indonesia in 2024 is about 281.6 million people. The religious composition is as follows: Muslims comprise 87.2% (244410757) of the population, Protestant Christians 6.9% (20806470), Catholics 2.9% (8596545), Hindus 1.7% (4728954), Buddhists 0.7% (2007638), Confucians 0.05% (76019) and others 0.04% (99045). In terms of national and political categorisation, Indonesia distinguishes between Protestant Christianity and Catholicism, with the latter referring specifically to Roman Catholic Christianity. The jurisdiction of the Catholic Church in Indonesia presently comprises 10 archdioceses and 28 suffragan dioceses, organised into 10 ecclesiastical provinces, along with one military ordinariate directly under the authority of the Holy See. Protestant Christianity encompasses all Christian denominations outside of Roman Catholicism, currently

represented by approximately 104 church synods under the auspices of the Indonesian Communion of Churches.

Christianity has a long history in Indonesia. Some scholars suggest that Christianity was introduced in the 7th century, prior to the colonial period, by the Nestorian group in the western region of Indonesia, specifically in Fanshur, South Sumatra. This Nestorian group was linked to the historical accounts of Apostle Thomas or sometimes Saint Bartholomew's journey to South India. However, some historians dispute the notion that Jesus' disciples reached as far as India, although they acknowledge the presence of a Christian community in Indonesia since the 7th century. Nonetheless, evidence of the Nestorian group's presence in Indonesia, similar to that in India, remains a subject of debate. Some hypothesise a potential spelling error in the name, suggesting that Fanshur in Indonesia may actually refer to Manshur in India (eds. Steenbrink & Aritonang 2008:3-8; Widyawati 2018).

The Indonesian Catholic Church officially recognises the arrival of Catholicism in the 16th century, specifically in 1534, commemorating the baptism performed by Portuguese missionaries in Halmahera, Eastern Indonesia (Steenbrink 2006; Riyanto 2023:32-33). This mission occurred a year after Pope Clement VII established the Diocese of Goa in India in 1533. In 1558, the Diocese of Goa was expanded with the establishment of the Diocese of Malacca, influenced by Portuguese colonial interests. This expansion facilitated the dispatch of additional missionaries from Portugal to serve in Eastern Indonesia. Saint Francis Xavier is one of the notable Catholic missionaries who embarked on a mission to the Maluku islands in 17th century (eds. Steenbrink & Aritonang 2008:9-23).

The introduction of Protestant Christianity began in the 17th century, brought by the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie. The Christian mission, both Catholic and Protestant, in Indonesia was intertwined with the era of European trade expansion to Asia and the colonial period. Spices were highly sought-after commodities during this time, with the islands of Maluku and Eastern Nusa Tenggara known for their spice production, fetching prices higher than gold. Consequently, Christianity is often associated with the motto 'Gold, Glory, and Gospel', reflecting the motivations behind European exploration since the 15th century (Mathes 1973; Neglia 1972).

Still, in the 16th century, the Portuguese missionaries expanded their mission from Maluku to Solor and Flores in Eastern Indonesia. Their mission lasted until the 19th century when they were expelled by the Dutch. Their mission was subsequently continued by Dutch missionaries, leading to such rapid growth that this region eventually became the primary stronghold of Catholicism in Indonesia (eds. Steenbrink & Aritonang 2008:73-98).

Following the bankruptcy of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), the Dutch East India Company, in 1799,

trade was assumed by the Dutch East Indies government, centralised in Batavia, which is now Jakarta, the capital of the Republic of Indonesia. On 07 May 1807, Pope Pius XI established the Apostolic Prefecture of the Dutch East Indies in Batavia, which managed missions across the Dutch colonial territories in Indonesia. The status of the Apostolic Prefecture was elevated to the Apostolic Vicariate on 20 September 1842. Additionally, in the early 20th century, the Holy See established several other apostolic prefectures in the Indonesian region, including Maluku, Kalimantan, Celebes and the Lesser Sunda Islands (eds. Steenbrink & Aritonang 2008).

On 17 August 1945, Indonesia proclaimed its independence from Dutch colonial rule. This significant event had a direct impact on Catholic missions in the country. The new government demanded a transition of ecclesiastical responsibilities from the Netherlands to Indonesia, a process known as 'Indonesianization' (Boelaars & Hardawiriana 2005:27; Willemsen 2004:36-37). This transition marked the beginning of decolonisation, as Indonesia sought to sever its ties with Dutch colonial structures, interests, socio-economic systems and political influences (Boelaars & Hardawiriana 2005:127). In 1961, Pope John XXIII declared the status of the Church in Indonesia to be changed from a mission territory to the Indonesian Catholic Church with its own hierarchy (Boelaars & Hardawiriana 2005:139). Indonesians used this opportunity to nationalise the Church, adapting it to a local-regional and national context within a predominantly Muslim society. One of the significant issues faced is inculturation – integrating the Church into the local Indonesian culture and context.

In terms of language, Indonesia is renowned for its rich linguistic diversity. The nation boasts more than 700 local languages spoken by over 600 ethnic groups scattered across more than 16000 islands (Musgrave 2014; Sneddon 2003). Managing this superdiverse linguistic landscape presents a complex and challenging endeavour (Zein 2020). *Bahasa Indonesia* has become the *lingua franca*, uniting the country and serving as the primary medium in education, politics and various official state activities. However, the promotion and widespread use of *Bahasa Indonesia* have posed a threat to local languages. The remarkable spread of Indonesian at the expense of local languages' domains has led to it being termed a 'killer language' (Mühlhäusler 1996:20). The centralistic national language policy has negatively impacted many local languages (Arka 2013; Rahmi 2015; Zein 2020). Experts have raised concerns about the potential extinction of several regional languages in Indonesia, alongside the declining love and proficiency among local residents in speaking their regional languages (Poedjosoedarmo 2006; Ravindranath & Cohn 2014). This decline signifies a loss of local cultural wealth and identity.

The development of knowledge, human mobility, technology and mass media has led younger generations to favour foreign languages over regional ones (Huszka, Stark & Aini 2024). Mastery of foreign languages is seen as advantageous

for educational and economic opportunities, further diminishing the love for local languages and cultures (Mauziyyah, Setyaningsih & Sumardi 2024). Additionally, religious movements that reject local cultures and languages pose a threat to the preservation of regional languages and cultures. This concern is relevant not only to Christianity but also to Islam, the majority religion, with its movements towards cultural purification and orientation towards Arab or Middle Eastern cultures (Al Qurtuby 2017; Budiwanti 2014; Hasan 2009). Therefore, efforts to celebrate, use, study and document regional languages in their various forms are crucial and valuable contributions to the nation.

The Catholic Church's language mission in West Flores, Eastern Indonesia

The spread of Catholicism in West Flores was significantly late, occurring three centuries after the initial mission in Eastern Flores. The Church officially designated West Flores as the centre of its mission in 1920, several years after the Dutch government officially occupied the region. The Dutch government, aiming to curb the spread of Islam in the area, prompted the Catholic mission by writing to the Apostolic Prefecture in Batavia to dispatch missionaries (Lon & Widyawati 2009; Steenbrink 2013; Widyawati & Lon 2023). Islam has been present in the region since the 16th century, introduced by individuals from the Bima and Gowa Sultanates, key Islamic centres in Eastern Indonesia.

With the full cooperation and support of the colonial authorities, Dutch missionaries succeeded in marginalising the influence of Islam and gaining the loyalty of the local population. The Church experienced substantial growth, achieving the missionaries' aspiration to 'Catholicize' the entire island of Flores. The mission's success was attributable not only to the appeal of the gospel and preaching but also to a comprehensive development strategy. Supported financially by Europe, the missionaries also established infrastructure, including highways, schools, clinics, agricultural projects, plantations, carpentry workshops, livestock farms, housing, markets and irrigation systems. These extensive contributions rendered the Catholic Church an essential institution for the local community (Widyawati & Lon 2019).

Unpacking the intersection of European colonialism, religious missions and the so-called 'civilising mission' is seriously complex and hotly debated. Dubois (2017) delves into Orientalism, highlighting how European powers believed they had a duty to bring 'civilisation' to non-European peoples. This often meant imposing European cultural, political and religious norms onto others. Watt (2011) also emphasises how the idea of civilisation was used to justify colonial expansion and the subjugation of local populations. Catholic and Protestant missions played huge roles in these colonial efforts, aiming to convert local populations to Christianity. This frequently involved suppressing indigenous religions and cultural practices.

European powers backed these missionary endeavours with material and political support, creating a tight link between colonialism and religious conversion. The forced imposition of European values and often beliefs led to conflict and resistance, especially from communities with strong religious identities.

However, in the context of the Catholic mission in Flores, although the community initially struggled with the presence of the Catholic religion, gradually the Church's omnipresence in various aspects of life fostered a strong communal identity among the people, who took pride in being Catholics. Among the Church's various missions, the focus on local language and culture was particularly significant. This study identifies four crucial forms in the Church's mission in this area: initial pioneering for practical purposes, translation of texts and songs, academic and systematic studies, and further development. Each stage is elaborated upon in detail in this section.

Early efforts: Communication and practical interests

When the missionaries first established missions, Latin was the official liturgical language of the Church; all prayers and hymns during worship were conducted in Latin. The centralisation of Latin for all Catholic rites globally was the result of a long historical journey rooted in European and Byzantine civilisation since the Middle Ages. This liturgical language emerged not only from the need for standardised worship but also as a means to consolidate papal authority, thereby creating centralisation within the Catholic Church (Romano 2014). As a result, churches without a Latin tradition were forced to conform to this Roman rule, rendering the Eucharistic liturgy foreign, static and rigid.

This imposition was further reinforced by theological currents that were hostile towards local cultures, often viewing non-Christian traditions and cultures as impediments to salvation, equating them with idolatry. Non-Christian cultures were deemed inferior and even antagonistic to Christ, religion and the Church. This understanding was particularly strong in pre-Second Vatican Council theological schools. Theologians such as Tertullian and Leo Tolstoy regarded the presence of Christ and the Church as heralding the demise of pagan civilisations. For them, loyalty to Christ and Christianity necessitated the rejection of local cultures. Conversely, Christian theologian Niebuhr strongly opposed the notion of 'Christ against culture' (Niebuhr 2001).

Although Latin was the Church's official liturgical language, it was effectively a 'dead' language, not used in everyday conversations. The missionaries spoke in Dutch, which was also used to communicate with government officials who supported the Catholic mission in West Flores. Before and during the early mission period, European missionaries learned Malay, the lingua franca of Indonesia. However, in the local context of West Flores, Malay was known only to a limited circle, primarily those who had interactions with

outsiders. The local population predominantly used the local language, the Manggarai, for daily communication, presenting initial communication challenges.

Efforts to bridge this linguistic gap were made by both parties, facilitated largely by the establishment of schools by Catholic missionaries. These schools used Malay and Dutch as instructional languages. The first teachers were brought from Eastern Flores, already Catholic and educated in Catholic institutions. These teachers played a crucial role in language education, as did the students in Catholic schools. Dutch missionaries learned Malay and Manggarai, while the local people learned Malay and Dutch in addition to speaking their native Manggarai.

In the 1920s, missionaries gathered small congregations and conducted worship in Latin, supplementing it with brief sermons in broken Malay. The congregation often struggled to understand these sermons, leading to ineffective communication. The people became mere spectators in the worship services. For the people of West Flores, whose rituals were festive, intimate and lively, the rigid Catholic Church service was particularly alien. Some missionaries recognised this issue and began learning the Manggarai to translate prayers. A Dutch missionary recorded that on 18 May 1922, for the first time after a Latin mass, he recited additional prayers in Manggarai, and a month later delivered a short sermon in Manggarai during the mass (Jehandut 2012:32).

Translation and composition of songs, prayers and scripture

Following the initial introduction of prayers in the Manggarai language, missionaries identified the need to adapt songs for official Eucharistic celebrations and community worship. The objective was to ensure that the Church liturgy resonated with the local population. Consequently, the initial effort involved translating Latin hymns into Manggarai. In 1922, two hymns, 'To Love Mary' and 'Asperges', were translated into Manggarai. The first hymn, a praise to Mary, was typically sung before or after the Eucharistic celebration or during devotions to Mary outside the Eucharist. The second hymn was sung during the Eucharistic celebration, during which the priest sprinkled water on the congregation as a symbol of cleansing.

The translation of these initial hymns garnered considerable attention and sympathy from the local population. As a result, efforts to translate Latin Church hymns continued, led by missionaries in collaboration with religious teachers and local community leaders (Jehandut 2012:4). In 1936, elementary school teacher P. Manti composed the first song in this vein, '*Doing koé Ga*' [Realise] and '*Kristus Moriga*' [Christus Lord]. It involved replacing the lyrics and context of traditional songs with new, religiously themed content, while retaining the original tone, rhythm and musical style. This marked the beginning of the transformation of traditional songs into Church hymns. The original version of '*Doing koé Ga*' was a joyful song about visiting one's hometown, which was transformed into a song of repentance

for Church use. Similarly, '*Kristus Moriga*', [Christ the Lord] initially a war song to motivate soldiers, was recontextualised as a hymn about Christ's suffering (Widyawati & Lon 2020:22–23).

The acceptance of these initial hymns inspired Willem van Bekkum, the Vicar Apostolic, to further encourage local people (mostly teachers) to adapt additional traditional songs for Church use. Between 1937 and 1942, local composers created 14 hymns: four in 1937, two in 1938, four in 1939, three in 1940 and one in 1942. By 1941, these adapted hymns, along with translated Latin hymns, were compiled and distributed in a simple stencil form, enabling their use across several parishes and stations (Jehandut 2012:47–50).

Between 1942 and 1945, European missionaries were detained by the Japanese army in Sulawesi, which halted the creation of Manggarai songs. It was not until 1946, with the return of the missionaries to West Flores, that the creation of new songs resumed, with three songs being produced that year, followed by two more in 1949. In 1947, this collection of songs was printed for the first time at the Arnoldus Ende printing house, one of the oldest printing establishments in Indonesia owned by the *Verbum Societa Divini* order. The songbook, entitled *Déré Serani* [Christian Songs], became the first church songbook in regional languages within the Indonesian church, setting a precedent for liturgical inculturation in other regions of Indonesia (Priest 2007).

By 1954, under the coordination of missionary Willem van Bekkum, local teachers had translated 77 hymns. From 1953 to 1962, a prolific period ensued, during which 49 new local songs were adapted and created as Church songs. In 1954, *Déré Serani* was reprinted, now featuring 94 songs, including 77 translated songs and 17 original Manggarai songs (Widyawati & Lon 2020). This achievement was largely attributed to the efforts of Wilhelmus van Bekkum, who became the first Bishop of Manggarai in 1961. He also pioneered the '*misa kaba*' [buffalo mass], a mass integrated with a buffalo slaughtering ceremony during harvest thanksgiving. Bishop van Bekkum actively encouraged local artists to continue creating new songs (Steenbrink 2015).

In 1960, the Liturgical Commission of the Ruteng Vicariate published a book containing 52 original Manggarai Church songs created by 24 local artists, titled *Déré Serani II*, printed by the Arnoldus Ende printing house. By 1963, the third edition of *Déré Serani* was published, combining the first two series and additional new songs, totalling 180 songs, including 96 original songs and 84 translated songs. This period coincided with the Second Vatican Council, where Mgr. Van Bekkum played a significant role, exemplifying the importance of incorporating local culture into the Church's liturgy.

The creation and translation of songs for *Déré Serani* continued until 1973, culminating in the fourth edition, which contained 224 songs, with 135 original Manggarai songs and the rest being translated. These songs, like their predecessors, were adapted from traditional Manggarai

songs originally intended for different purposes. While continuing the translation of Latin hymns into Manggarai, missionaries encouraged local artists to adapt traditional songs for use in the mass and other liturgies (Jenadut 2002:46; Verheijen 1938:1).

By the 1970s, *Déré Serani* had become a significant phenomenon in the Indonesian Catholic Church's development, transforming the rigid and unengaging Latin-Roman liturgy into one infused with local colour and nuance. Initially, some elders and parishioners found this transformation strange, given the differences in theology, context, time, content and meaning between traditional songs and mass songs. Despite these initial reservations, *Déré Serani* ultimately became an icon of how the Western-faced Church was integrated into local culture. It symbolises the Church's inculturation within the West Flores community, fostering a strong identity that merged Catholicism with Manggarai cultural elements. Through *Déré Serani*, local culture was elevated to a sacred space within the realm of Catholic worship.

Associated with the local language and culture, the translation of songs, texts, liturgy and sermons from Latin to Manggarai was pivotal for the local community. It marked the first time the local language was used for religious purposes. Moreover, Manggarai was transliterated into written form for the first time, contributing to its documentation and broader usage. No other group had previously documented the language in any script. The Catholic Church's translation and composition efforts were instrumental in establishing Manggarai as a written language.

Alongside song translations, the Church translated the Holy Scriptures into Manggarai, leveraging the expertise of religious teachers and local figures. Initially, these translations were personal and used for religious studies, but efforts to unify and publish these texts made them accessible to a wider audience. Subsequent collaboration with the Indonesian Bible Institute (LAI), a Protestant Christian organisation dedicated to translating the Holy Scriptures across Indonesia, resulted in the New Testament being published in Manggarai in 2014. This Scripture is now used in all Manggarai churches, especially during mass and inculturation celebrations.

In the broader Indonesian context, the LAI has been translating the Bible into regional languages since the 17th century, starting with the Malay translation of the Gospel of Matthew in 1729. To date, the entire New Testament and Old Testament OT have been published in 38 regional languages, with partial translations in 79 other languages (Iskandar & Purnomo 2023; Maulana et al. 2024). The LAI's systematic documentation and utilisation of regional languages in church liturgies help maintain these languages. Currently, the LAI is working on translating the Old Testament into Manggarai, with an estimated publication year of 2026, involving local Catholic teachers, LAI and the Scripture Commission of the Ruteng Diocese.

Local traditions and Catholic liturgy

Beyond the mere translation of texts, the encounter between Catholicism and local culture deeply engages with the realm of religious rituals. This integration is evident in the efforts to synthesise traditional ceremonies – conducted entirely in local languages – with the liturgy of the Catholic Church. Prior to the introduction of Catholicism in this region, indigenous peoples practised animistic and dynamic beliefs, viewing nature and life as sacred entities in constant interaction with the Divine. Their faith was expressed through a multitude of rituals encompassing every facet of life: rites of passage from birth to death, agricultural ceremonies from planting to harvesting, and rituals during significant events such as natural hazards. These practices embodied their deep belief in the interconnected power of God, ancestors and nature.

A critical component of these rituals was the sacrifice of animals such as buffalo, horses, pigs, goats, chickens, or even simple offerings like chicken eggs. During these ceremonies, spiritual leaders or shamans would interpret the animal's liver or intestines to conclude whether the spirits and ancestors would accept their prayers. Moreover, the entire environment of the Manggarai people's lives was considered sacred – a dwelling place for spirits and ancestors. Homes, villages, gardens, forests, rivers, springs and other natural settings are all potential sites for special rituals. Confronted with these deeply rooted traditions, many early missionaries dismissed them as idolatrous practices and labelled the practitioners as infidels, attempting to eradicate these beliefs (Erb 2007). This approach, however, fails to respect the profound spiritual significance of local customs.

Conversely, other missionaries adopted a more integrative strategy, encouraging people to shift their mindset from what they perceive as primitive agriculture to semi-modern practices – a transition documented by Borgias (2016). The persistent influence of Christianity and modern knowledge, introduced through church services and Catholic schools, initiated significant changes in local communities. These transformations are manifested in altered architectural styles, evolving beliefs about dwellings, agriculture, calamities, illnesses and modifications in conducting local religious rituals. Intriguingly, some missionaries, particularly those with anthropological backgrounds, recognised the value of blending traditional rituals with Christian beliefs. Notably, Bishop Willem van Bekkum, appointed as the Vicariate and later the first Bishop in this region, demonstrated profound sympathy towards local customs. He attempted to merge indigenous beliefs with Catholic rituals. Even before the Second Vatican Council, Bishop van Bekkum introduced the '*misa kaba*' [buffalo mass], integrating the mass with a buffalo slaughtering ceremony during harvest thanksgiving (Steenbrink 2015). This innovative fusion not only respected local traditions but also enriched the Eucharistic celebration. Associating the buffalo – a local sacrificial animal – with Christ's sacrifice for humanity bridged cultural divides and fostered deeper religious engagement. Conducting the

Eucharist in the local language further enhanced appreciation for indigenous culture and linguistic heritage.

Furthermore, the incorporation of traditional prayers known locally as *'torok'* into Eucharistic celebrations and other liturgies exemplifies this blending of customs. *'torok'* serves as the community's revered medium to communicate with the Divine, using elevated local language crafted into beautiful, metaphor-laden verses. To this day, the Eucharist – whether conducted in Indonesian or local languages – consistently includes *'torok'*, special prayers of petition absent from the universal Catholic liturgical system. Beyond the Eucharistic celebration, various traditional rituals associated with birth, rites of passage, marriage, death and agricultural festivals are invariably infused with Christian elements. The intertwining of traditional prayers with Catholic liturgy reinforces the argument that syncretism can be a powerful tool for fostering religious unity and cultural preservation.

Conversely, indigenous customs have profoundly influenced Catholic traditions, challenging the notion of unilateral religious imposition. In constructing churches and ecclesiastical buildings such as schools, hospitals, monasteries and presbyteries, traditional rituals are performed at various stages, adhering to local customs. This practice reflects the belief that building materials, the construction process and the aura surrounding human activities are permeated by the power of spirits and ancestors. Similarly, ecclesiastical ceremonies such as the ordination of priests and bishops or the taking of monastic vows are typically preceded by traditional rituals, including animal sacrifices and offerings to ancestral spirits. As a result, these two traditions mutually influence one another. Despite the population's formal conversion to Catholicism, syncretism remains notably strong, enriching the spiritual landscape with a unique fusion of beliefs.

This dynamic interplay between Catholicism and local culture challenges simplistic narratives of religious conversion and dominance. By recognising and embracing indigenous practices, missionaries like Bishop van Bekkum facilitated a more authentic and meaningful integration of faith. This approach underscores the argument that cultural sensitivity and adaptation are crucial in religious evangelisation, promoting mutual respect and fostering a syncretic tradition that honours both heritage and belief.

Academic and systematic efforts

A systematic effort to document the Manggarai language was initiated by P.A. Burger in 1949, who conducted an in-depth language study. Unfortunately, he passed away soon after, and his work was published posthumously by his mentor, Prof. J. Gonda (Teeuw 1994; Verheijen 1970:i–xii). The most comprehensive study of Manggarai's language and cultural heritage was undertaken by J.A.J. Verheijen, a Dutch Catholic missionary with a background in anthropology.

Between 1935 and 1942, Verheijen collected a vast array of local myths, stories, riddles, incantations and other narratives. His first 1938 publication, *'Inheemse Kerkzang in de Manggarai'*, featured original Manggarai Church hymns, reflecting his dual aims of cultural documentation and linguistic analysis (Willemsen 1998).

From 1948 to 1991, Verheijen systematically compiled word lists and organised them with the help of local collaborators, resulting in the publication of several editions of Manggarai dictionaries by reputable international and national publishers. He also wrote extensively on other regional languages, including Sama and Bajo, Rembong and East Sumba, contributing articles, books and dictionaries to both European and Indonesian journals in linguistics, geography, ethnology, theology and missions. Verheijen's research encompassed not only language but also flora, fauna and various cultural aspects. His efforts transformed orally transmitted local knowledge into official texts and publications, widely used for educational and religious purposes (Widyawati 2023).

Producing over 100 scholarly works on Manggarai, Verheijen inspired local academics, including Catholic priests and university lecturers, to explore and document their cultural heritage. This research positioned the local Catholic Church as a knowledge centre, establishing language and culture study centres within religious communities, parishes, Catholic universities and schools. These institutions provide essential resources, references and forums for discussion, underscoring the significant role of the Catholic Church in preserving local languages and cultures amid minimal attention from other local, national and international entities.

Contemporary efforts

The availability of materials, sources and academic references, along with popular texts from missionaries and local church figures, ensures these resources continue to serve a wide range of interests today. The Catholic Church remains the primary institution utilising and promoting local languages and cultures, particularly through its inculturation programme.

While inculturation encompasses various meanings, the local church programme in West Flores emphasises liturgical and ritual aspects. The Church conducts masses in the Manggarai language and integrates elements of Manggarai culture into the liturgy and various church activities. The Diocese mandates all parishes to conduct an inculturation mass in the local Manggarai language every third week of the month. Nationally, the Indonesian church adheres to the Eucharistic celebration order compiled by the liturgy commission of the Indonesian Bishop Conferences. As the national language and lingua franca, Indonesian is predominantly used in everyday conversations, education, government and religious prayers. To ensure the local Manggarai language is not forgotten, there is a diocesan agreement requiring all churches to use it on the third week. On other weeks, parishes may choose to use either Indonesian or the local language.

These masses incorporate Manggarai language and cultural elements such as songs, Bible readings, sermons, dances, traditional prayers, costumes and other aspects adapted in the inculturation liturgy.

Beyond liturgical practices, the Church employs local traditional rituals in various church activities, including house and church construction, funerals, ordinations, marriages and other events. Local rituals, such as the slaughtering of sacrificial animals and traditional prayers, are incorporated into these activities, underscoring the importance of local language and culture.

Catholic schools play a crucial role in using and disseminating local cultural aspects for religious and educational purposes. As one of the Church's key missions in Flores, these schools, established as some of the earliest and best educational institutions, significantly contribute to maintaining local languages and cultures.

In recent years, the local Catholic Church has implemented special programmes to promote tourism and glorify local culture. The Church has established tourism and culture commissions at the diocesan and parish levels. In 2022, the Church declared the 'Year of Holistic Tourism', during which it extensively promoted nature, culture and religious tourism. The Church also organised numerous festivals that combined religious aspects with local cultural elements, actively contributing to the promotion of local culture and language.

Inculturation and linguistic mission: Cultural integration

Inculturation has emerged as a significant aspect of the Indonesian church's mission, including in West Flores, focussing on language and culture. The term 'inculturation' gained recognition within the Catholic Church in the 1960s, initially introduced by Belgian missiologist Joseph Mason and later adopted during the Synod of Bishops in 1977. It was further explained in Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesis Tradendae* (1979 §53) where he presented inculturation as a model of 'new evangelisation'. This concept aims to uphold the gospel's integrity while promoting sensitivity to diverse cultural contexts (Doyle 2012).

The Second Vatican Council underscored the relationship between theology and culture, addressing the previously strained connection because of the Church's strong centralisation and universalism. Theologians like Hendri de Lubac advocated for cultural adaptation as essential to Catholicism, a notion reinforced by Richard Niebuhr's (2012) call for respect and learning from culture. The Council emphasises the Church's engagement with the world, making inculturation a key element of documents such as *Gaudium et Spes*, *Lumen Gentium* and *Ad Gentes*. This global message of cultural engagement resonates deeply, including in Indonesia.

In Indonesia, inculturation initially focussed on liturgy, incorporating aspects of local culture. As early as 1955, Indonesian bishops decided to translate the Roman Ritual into Indonesian, recognising the need for comprehensible liturgy despite Latin being the official language. This initiative was further strengthened post-Vatican II. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II and Asian bishops reiterated this emphasis. Today, various liturgical inculturation efforts continue in Indonesia, including the development of inculturative liturgical songs, the construction of culturally relevant church buildings, altar decorations, liturgical vestments, reliefs, sacred images and regional dances performed during Eucharistic processions.

Research on the Catholic Church in West Flores exemplifies the impact of the inculturation programme on the use, celebration and preservation of local languages and cultures. Inculturation encourages the Church to harness the richness of local languages and cultures for its mission, positively impacting local culture and language. This approach allows the Church's language and cultural mission to align with both ecclesiastical and broader community interests, fostering simultaneous benefits within and beyond the Church.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church in Indonesia, particularly in Eastern Indonesia, has significantly contributed to the preservation and promotion of local languages and cultures through three key avenues. Firstly, by incorporating local languages and cultural elements into church activities, especially liturgy and worship, the Church elevates the status of these languages, transforming them from everyday vernaculars to esteemed religious languages. This practice, adopted by both foreign missionaries and local church members, underscores the importance and prestige of local languages.

Secondly, the Church's active involvement in academic research and the publication of works on local linguistic and cultural aspects facilitates broader studies in social, linguistic and cultural fields. As the primary institution spearheads these efforts, the Church plays a vital role in the academic preservation and dissemination of local knowledge.

Thirdly, the Church integrates local languages and cultures into various programmes, including initiatives to support local tourism. By doing so, the Church not only promotes cultural heritage but also creates new opportunities in tourism and economics. This multifaceted contribution exemplifies the Church's role in national development, despite being a minority group in Indonesia. The Indonesian Catholic Church's efforts in language and cultural preservation are a commendable example of its commitment to both ecclesiastical and societal enrichment.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their sincere gratitude to the Institute for Research and Community Service at the Catholic University of Indonesia, Santu Paulus Ruteng, for their generous

material and non-material support during this research. Additionally, they deeply appreciate the invaluable contributions of the resource persons, officials and figures of the West Flores Catholic Church, whose provision of critical data and information greatly enriched this study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

F.W., Y.S.L. and H.M. equally contributed to proposal development, data collection, data analysis and manuscript writing. F.W. coordinated all activities, while Y.S.L. and H.M. contributed as team members.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng, Institutional Review Board (reference no.: 153a/USP/R01/PE02/K/06/2024).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

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