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The Inculturation of “*Pasahat Ulos Saput*” in the Death Tradition of “*Saur Matua*” of the Batak Toba Tribe in the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the Body 178

BOFRY WAHYU SAMOSIR¹, EMANUEL P.D. MARTASUDJITA, PR²

THE INCULTURATION OF “PASAHAT ULOS SAPUT” IN THE DEATH TRADITION OF “SAUR MATUA” OF THE BATAK TOBA TRIBE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S BLESSING OF THE BODY

Abstract

This article analyses one of the death traditions in Indonesian society, specifically the *Saur Matua* death tradition of the Batak Toba tribe. It explores a particular ritual as an entry point for inculturation within the Catholic Church’s funeral rites. A qualitative, ethnographic approach was employed, involving in-depth interviews with four informants recognised by the Batak Toba community as experts in Batak culture (known as *Raja Parhata*, ceremonial public speakers). Interview data were enriched with insights from books and scholarly articles. The analysis yields several conclusions regarding possible inculturation. Firstly, the Church may include the ritual “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*” as an inculturated element within the Blessing of the Body. The ritual shares the same intention as the funeral service, seeking God’s blessing for the deceased. The Church prays for and blesses the body by sprinkling holy water; *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* blesses the body by bestowing “*Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*.” Secondly, after blessing the earth and flowers as symbols of Christian hope for the dead, the Church may also bless the *Sijagaron*, a distinctive symbol in the *Saur Matua* ceremony. The overall aim is to enable Batak Toba Catholics to appreciate the

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Saur Matua tradition as a celebration of faith so that traditional elements can be carried out reverently.

Keywords: *Saur Matua*, *Ulos Pucca*, *Ulos Saput*, Inculturation, Catholic Church, Saussure

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, the Batak Toba community shows special respect for deceased family members. One death tradition that is carefully preserved, and indeed desired by the Batak Toba community, is the *Saur Matua*. In this tradition, the community accords particular honour to parents who, before dying, have fulfilled their responsibilities completely. One such honour is the bestowal of the “*Ulos Saput* of the *Pucca* type” upon the body. This *Ulos Pucca* carries specific meanings. Accordingly, this study examines the meanings and symbols associated with the *Ulos Saput* (type *Pucca*). It then examines the ritual of “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*” in relation to the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the Body.

In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church expresses increasing attention and love for the cultures and traditions lived by Catholics worldwide. The Church recognizes its close unity with culture. Chapter I of *Gaudium et Spes* (on the development of culture) encourages the Church to foster genuine and fruitful dialogue with culture (GS 56). Thus, the Church situates human cultural development, especially in the modern age, within its sublime dignity in communion with God (GS 19; Martasudjita 2021, p. 62).

Article 58 of *Gaudium et Spes* states that “The Church, sent to all peoples of all times and in all regions, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any tribe or nation, to any particular way of life, to any customs, old or new.” This means that the Church always opens its doors wide and welcomes cultures and customs that develop dynamically in the lives of the faithful. Professor Emanuel Martasudjita argues that this perspective in *Gaudium et Spes* provides a foundation for developing the theology of inculturation in Church life (Martasudjita 2021, p. 63). In continuity with Vatican II and with the inculturation project on funerary worship at the Faculty of Theology, Wedabhakti, this paper examines the ritual tradition of *Pasahat Ulos Saput* within the *Saur Matua* ceremony as a concrete form of inculturation in Indonesia.

RELATED LITERATURES

Previous studies have discussed the use of *Ulos* in death traditions. Firstly, Siahaan et al. (2020) explore the nature and significance of bestowing *Ulos* in the *Saur Matua* tradition. Secondly, Rachel et al. (2024) analyse the role and significance of *Ulos Tujung* in Batak Toba funeral rites. Thirdly, Desiani (2020) examines the symbolism inherent in Batak Toba *Ulos*. Building on these works, this article contributes by analysing the meaning of *Ulos Pucca* as *Ulos Saput* within the *Saur Matua* tradition and assessing pathways for inculturation in the Catholic Church's funeral service.

This research also explores the tradition's theological meaning and its relationship to the practical liturgy of Catholic funerary worship. The guiding questions are: Does the ritual "*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*" express a relationship with God? Can this ritual be integrated into the Catholic Church's blessing of the dead? How do Batak Toba Catholics view this ritual in light of the Church's faith? In practising the *Saur Matua* tradition, how do Batak Catholics live their faith?

The study's purposes are fourfold: (1) to identify the theological meaning of the ritual "*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*" within the *Saur Matua* ceremony; (2) to identify bridges and opportunities for new inculturation within Catholic funerary worship, especially for Batak Toba Catholics devoted to this tradition; (3) to encourage Batak Catholics to celebrate the *Saur Matua* ceremony in a sacred atmosphere and avoid practices that diminish its highest values; and (4) to assist Church ministers with a renewed perspective when serving Batak Catholics who observe this tradition.

METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

This study employed qualitative methods, specifically an ethnographic model, to collect data on the *Saur Matua* tradition of the Batak Toba tribe. Data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with four informant experts in the Batak Toba culture, known as *Parsinabung* or *Raja Parhata* (ceremonial public speakers). The research questions were:

RQ1: What is the meaning of the *Saur Matua* tradition in the Toba Batak community?

RQ2: How does the Catholic Church respond to this *Saur Matua* tradition?

RQ3: How can this *Saur Matua* tradition be received within the Catholic Church’s blessing of the deceased?

Interview data were complemented by a literature study using books and articles on the *Saur Matua* tradition and inculturation. Collected data include (a) descriptive accounts of the tradition and its implementation, (b) values embodied in the tradition, and (c) an exploration of the meaning of “giving *Ulos Saput*” as a distinctive element for potential inculturation in the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the Body.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the results of this research, we describe five important points. Firstly, the *Saur Matua* tradition and its implementation. Secondly, an analysis of the *Saur Matua* tradition in Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics. Thirdly, the content and meaning of the ritual “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*”. Fourthly, the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the body. Fifthly, inculturating “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*” within the blessing of the body.

THE SAUR MATUA TRADITION AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

Etymologically, *Saur Matua* consists of two words: *saur* (“complete/perfect”) and *matua* (“elderly”). Literally, a *Saur Matua* death is a “perfect” death in old age (Irma 2020, p. 3). According to Harib Pakpahan, a *Raja Parhata* in Tomok, Samosir, North Sumatra, the *Saur Matua* tradition is a family celebration of gratitude to God for parents who lived long, enjoyed abundant provisions, and fulfilled their responsibilities, most notably marrying off all their children. The status of having all children married symbolises the perfection of life for the Batak Toba people (Junita 2016, p. 6). Simon Samosir (a *Raja Parhata* in Bengkulu) adds that this “perfection” also applies to parents whose children have become priests, monks, or nuns.

In the Batak Toba tradition, a *Saur Matua* death is among the most significant, along with *Saur Matua Bulung*, which occurs when the deceased’s children have given them grandchildren (Hugo & Ilona 2016, p. 95). Parents who die in this “perfect” state should be escorted to their final rest with

equal dignity, *ulaon na gok* (a full traditional ceremony) (Junita 2016, p. 7). Consequently, the extended family collaborates with cultural authorities: *Raja Parhata* (ceremonial public speakers), *Tulang* (maternal uncles), and *Hula-hula* (mother's brothers), among others.

The extended family bears major responsibilities. Firstly, they convene a planning meeting (*martonggoraja*) with the *Raja Parhata*, *Tulang*, and *Hula-hula*. As Harib Pakpahan explains, these traditional leaders determine the conditions for conducting a *Saur Matua* ceremony. Although specific requirements may vary by region, the most important condition is that all children are married. Secondly, because *Saur Matua* is a family thanksgiving celebration, the extended family must gather all relatives for prayer and to take turns bidding farewell to the deceased. Thirdly, according to Romangapul Sinaga (*Raja Parhata* in Perawang, Riau), the family provides a buffalo or cow. Harib Pakpahan notes that the buffalo symbolizes the steadfastness and strength of the deceased. Its meat is distributed as *jambar marnipuk*, a traditional sharing of meat with *Tulang* and other relatives, with a portion reserved for communal consumption.

Once the conditions are met and the family is assembled, the ceremony begins. Generally, it comprises two parts.

Part I: the household rites (*jabu*). According to Hoberlin Sinaga (*Raja Parhata*, Perawang), this portion centres on the *Tulang* and *Hula-hula*. Following a brief church service (Romangapul Sinaga), the *Moppo* rite takes place: the *hasuhuton* (the deceased's clan family), together with *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* and *Boru*, place the body in the coffin opposite the children's room. After *Moppo*, *Tulang* (for a male deceased) or *Hula-hula* (for a female deceased) bestow the *Ulos Saput* (Batak funerary cloth) of the *Pucca* type upon the body. Beforehand, they offer blessings, prayerful farewells full of hope for the deceased's happiness. They also place the *Ulos Sampetua* over the surviving spouse's shoulder as a sign that the spouse has experienced a *Saur Matua* death in the family. The household rites conclude with a prayer by *Tulang* or *Hula-hula*.

Part II: the courtyard rites (*maralaman*). These begin with the *Sijagaron* procession from the house to the yard. The *Raja Parhata* opens with prayer, delivers *umpasa* (wise counsel), and invites the *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* to bestow the *Sijagaron* upon the eldest son-in-law and the oldest grandchild (Gloriana 2024, p. 425). *Sijagaron* from *jagar* ("honoured") consists of various plants arranged with rice in a basket, worn as a crown of honour and symbolizing a successful, ideal life (Gloriana 2024, p. 422). The eldest

son-in-law then leads (*mangomppa*) the line while bearing the *Sijagaron* on his head, followed by relatives carrying additional *Sijagaron*. The family performs the *tortor sombah Sijagaron* to *gondang sabangunan* (traditional funerary music), circling the coffin three times (Gloriana 2024, pp. 425_426). This dance honours the deceased and expresses descendants' love and gratitude for their life and struggles (Banjarnahor et al. 2024, p. 281). When the procession ends, the *Sijagaron* is placed beside the coffin under the witness of *Tulang/Hula-hula* (Sitinjak et al. 2024, p. 18).

During the full traditional event (*ulaon na gok*) in the courtyard, the *Raja Parhata* invites the *hasuhuton* and *Boru* to perform *tortor sombahsombah*, offer remarks, and conclude with *sitiotio* (shouting *horas* three times). A family representative then reads the deceased's life history (*majaha Jujur Ngolu*). Next, those required to be present bestow *Ulos Holong* and *umpasa* on the bereaved family. As Hoberlin Sinaga explains, the first to present *Ulos* and rice are the *Tulang* or *Hula-hula*, along with their entourage, who also dance *tortor*. The *Ulos* and rice express profound affection; the rice (*boras sipiritondi*) is plain rice flour symbolising blessing and the strengthening of the *tondi* (soul) (Sitinjak et al. 2024, p. 20). The family reciprocates with beer money and *jambar* (buffalo or beef) and ends with *sitiotio*.

Subsequently, the *Raja Parhata* calls other groups in turn to offer *umpasa*, *Ulos*, and rice. According to Simon Samosir, beyond *Tulang* or *Hula-hula*, the groups include: (1) *Bona Tulang* (grandparents), (2) *Tulang Rorobot* (maternal uncle), (3) *Bonaniari* (grandparents of the deceased's grandparents), (4) *Hula-hula martinadohon* (siblings of the deceased), (5) *Hula-hula naposo* (sons-in-law's families), and (6) *Simatua ni Boru* (daughters-in-law). On this occasion, *Simatua ni Boru* does not give *Ulos* and rice but offers *tuppak* (money) in solidarity. The bereaved family then gives *Ulos* and rice to them and concludes with *sitiotio*. Finally, *Dongan Sahuta* and *Dongan Tubuh* (local relatives) offer *tuppak* as financial assistance.

When all tokens of love (*Ulos*, rice, money) have been given, the *Raja Parhata* invites the first *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* to close with a communal prayer. As Hoberlin Sinaga notes, they ask God's blessing so that the *Sijagaron* may be an abundant blessing for the bereaved. The *Raja Parhata* then directs the family and guests to carry the *Sijagaron* home while dancing and to present it to the eldest son-in-law, who is expected to be a role model and pass on the deceased's blessings (Sitinjak et al. 2024, p. 21). The family expresses gratitude to all who supported the *Saur Matua* ceremony.

After the courtyard rites, the family entrusts the coffin to the Church for prayers and burial. Following the burial, the *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* return home with the family for *ungkap hombang* (distribution of the remaining inheritance). As Romangapul Sinaga explains, the *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* present *dekke* (fish) and counsel to the family, after which the extended family gives them the deceased's inheritance (money or land certificates). Upon receipt, any debts of the deceased are deemed settled. The distribution is carried out with respect and love.

ANALYSIS OF THE SAUR MATUA TRADITION IN FERDINAND SAUSSURE'S SEMIOTICS

Saussure's semiology, "the science of signs in society", offers a lens for analysing the *Saur Matua* tradition (Darma et al. 2020, p. 51). Four core concepts are pertinent: (1) signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified); (2) langue and parole; (3) synchronic and diachronic analysis; and (4) syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative) relations.

- 1) **Signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified).** Each linguistic sign comprises these inseparable components (Rayya 2022, p. 5). Selected examples in the *Saur Matua* tradition:
 - a. *Tortor Sombah* (signifier): a traditional Batak Toba dance offered to God and to persons as a sign of respect → (signified): reverence and honour (Akbar et al. 2021, p. 67).
 - b. *Sijagaron* (signifier): a crown-like arrangement of meaningful plants with rice in a basket → (signified): a successful, ideal life (Akbar et al. 2021, p. 71; Sinaga et al. 2023, pp. 196_197).
 - c. *Hata Umpasa* (signifier): poetic counsel/blessings from *Tulang/Hula-hula* → (signified): prayerful blessing and hope (Monica et al. 2020, p. 427).
 - d. *Ulos Saput Ragidup* (signifier): a precious funerary Ulos bestowed by *Tulang/Hula-hula* → (signified): hope that God will receive the deceased.
 - e. *Ulos Sampetua* (signifier): Ulos placed on the surviving spouse → (signified): gratitude and acknowledgment of a *Saur Matua* death in the family.

- f. *Ulos Holong* (signifier): Ulos given to the bereaved family → (signified): love and solidarity.
 - g. *Boras* (signifier): rice → (signified): blessing and intercession for the souls of the family.
 - h. *Tuppak* (signifier): monetary gift → (signified): love and support for the bereaved.
 - i. *Jambar* (signifier): distributed portions of buffalo/beef → (signified): gratitude and affection shared with relatives.
- 2) ***Langue and parole.*** Langue refers to the socially shared, abstract system; ***parole*** is its concrete manifestation (Rayya 2022, p. 10). Examples:
- a. *Langue*: the mandate to "give special respect to parents who pass away without leaving a burden" → *Parole*: the household and courtyard *Saur Matua* rites.
 - b. *Langue*: prayers and *umpasa* that the deceased be received by God → *Parole*: bestowal of *Ulos Saput* upon the body in the coffin.
 - c. *Langue*: prayers and *umpasa* that descendants receive abundant blessings → *Parole*: the procession of bringing the *Sijagaron* into the house and presenting it to the eldest son-in-law.
 - d. *Langue*: concluding thanks from the family → *Parole*: dancing *manortor sitiotio* and saying "*horas*" three times.
- 3) ***Synchronic and diachronic perspectives.*** Synchronic analysis examines an event at a particular time; diachronic analysis views it across time (Rayya 2022, p. 11). Examples:
- a. *Synchronic*: the procession carrying the *Sijagaron* and coffin from the house to the yard → *Diachronic*: the extended family's obligation to perform the *tortor sombahsombah* and to express sorrow during the courtyard rites.
 - b. *Synchronic*: the sequence of courtyard ceremonies, greetings, life history, giving of *Ulos* and rice by various kin groups; reciprocal gifts (*tuppak*, *jambar*); return of *Sijagaron* to the house; prayers and blessings; thanksgiving → *Diachronic*: the family's lifelong memory and continuing gratitude shaped by this day-long ceremony.
 - c. *Synchronic*: the procession returning the *Sijagaron* indoors → *Diachronic*: reception of the *Sijagaron* as a lasting symbol of blessing before burial

- 4) ***Syntagmatic and paradigmatic (associative) relations.*** Syntagmatic relations are linear combinations of signs manifested in events; paradigmatic relations are sets of possible substitutions. Examples:
- Syntagmatic: *Tulang* or *Hula-hula*, *Bona Tulang*, *Tulang Rorobot*, *Bona Ni Ari*, *Hula-hula martinadohon*, and *Hula-hula naposo* give *Ulos* and rice to the family. → Paradigmatic: the family reciprocates with *tuppak*, *jambar*, beer, and other drinks.
 - Syntagmatic: *Simatua ni Boru* gives *tuppak*. → Paradigmatic: the family gives *Ulos* and rice to each *Simatua ni Boru*.
 - Syntagmatic: *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* gives *dekke* as *ungkap hombung*. → Paradigmatic: the family gives *jambar* to *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* before distributing inheritance.

The signs in this tradition thus carry profound meanings and can serve as conduits for inculturation with the Catholic Church's funerary rites.

THE CONTENT AND MEANING OF THE RITUAL “PASAHAH ULOS PUCCA AS ULOS SAPUT”

In the Batak Toba community, *Ulos* is a traditional shawl-like cloth of varied patterns, designs, and colours, woven by women (*martonun Ulos*) (Inestya 2020, p. 128). The predominant colours are red, black, and white, often enriched with gold or silver threads (Jusni 2022, p. 14). *Ulos* is used in daily life and is essential in both wedding and death ceremonies (Jusni 2022, p. 2). Types of *Ulos* correspond to their functions (Inestya 2020, pp. 129–131). Among them, *Ulos Pucca* is the most expensive for the Batak Toba (Siallagan et al. 2024, p. 11812).

In funerary rites, the *Ulos* used varies according to the deceased's status. The *Ulos* bestowed on the deceased is called *Ulos Saput*, the final *Ulos*. It expresses the hope that the body and spirit of the deceased will be safe on the journey to heaven (Akbar et al. 2022, p. 103). In the *Saur Matua* tradition, according to Harib Pakpahan, the type of *Ulos Saput* given is *Ulos Pucca*. By classification, *Ulos Pucca* belongs to *Ulos nabalga*, the highest category (Inestya 2020, p. 131). Its dominant red colour derives from natural dyes processed from plant roots and other materials (Siallagan et al. 2024, p. 11812). It may also be classified as *Ragidup*, a most sacred type of

Ulos (Inestya 2020, p. 133). Rich patterning endows it with layered meanings (Siallagan et al. 2024, p. 11812), hence its status as a treasured Batak Toba cultural heritage.

Meanings associated with *Ulos Pucca* include fertility and new life, spiritual protection, respect and offering, social status, and enduring cultural heritage (Siallagan et al. 2024, p. 11815). These meanings align with three Batak Toba life goals: *hagabeon* (descendants), *hasangapon* (honour/wealth), and *hamoraon* (social status). In the *Saur Matua* ceremony, the bestowal of *Ulos Pucca* by *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* conveys not only respect and gratitude but also spiritual efficacy, blessing, and protection for the body and spirit from evil or even natural calamity (Siallagan et al. 2024, p. 11815). It is a sign of deep love from descendants and the community for parents who fulfilled life's purposes pre-eminently, having all children married. As the final *Ulos*, it symbolizes blessing and hope that the deceased may be protected by God and journey safely to heaven.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S BLESSING OF THE BODY

The Catholic Church is called to union with Christ, the Light of the World; the Church comes from Him, lives by Him, and goes to Him (LG 3). From birth to death, the Church accompanies the faithful with worship and pastoral care (Rumanto 2022, p. 5). In the face of death, the Church seeks to clarify believers' relationship with Christ's Paschal Mystery (cf. Rom 6:5), praying that the God of mercy receives the souls of the departed (Rumanto 2022, p. 9) and consoling the bereaved (Rumanto 2022, p. 9).

The Church provides various services associated with death: prayers before death; prayers after death; washing and preparation of the body; the Blessing of the Body; closing the casket; the sending and departure of the body; burial; military; honours; cremation; deposition of ashes; services for the unbaptized (blessing, funeral, deposition of ashes); and exhumation/transfer rites. In the funeral service, the Church places hope in Christ, who has conquered death, and asks that the light of His resurrection guide the deceased to the Father (Rumanto 2022, pp. 138_139). The Church sprinkles holy water upon the body (*if possible*), asking God to sanctify it from all sin and punishment (Rumanto 2022, p. 148). The Church also blesses the earth and flowers used at the funeral.

INCULTURATING “PASAHAT ULOS PUCCA AS ULOS SAPUT” WITHIN THE BLESSING OF THE BODY

After examining the *Saur Matua* tradition, we propose that the ritual “Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput” can be integrated into the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the Body as an inculturated element. Two considerations support this. Firstly, the *Pasahat Ulos Saput* rite, conducted in the home, involves *Tulang* or *Hula-hula* bestowing *Ulos Pucca* as the final Ulos, accompanied by *umpasa*, blessings and prayers, a form of spiritual communication with God on behalf of the deceased. Secondly, following this bestowal, the *Sijagaron* procession, to be handed to the eldest son-in-law, symbolises abundant blessings for the descendants. The *Sijagaron* thus merits the Church’s pastoral attention.

A possible sequence for inculturation is as follows:

- Firstly, Scripture and exhortation: The Blessing of the Body begins with readings and a brief homily to strengthen the family’s faith.
- Secondly, Blessing of the body: The minister sprinkles holy water and, if appropriate, incenses the body while praying for purification and forgiveness.
- Thirdly, Bestowal of *Ulos Saput*: The minister invites the *Tulang* or *Raja Parhata* (family representative) to perform “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*.”
- Fourthly, Blessing of earth and flowers: The minister blesses the earth and flowers to be used at the grave.
- Fifthly, Blessing of the *Sijagaron*: The minister blesses the *Sijagaron* with holy water, asking that the hopes embodied in it become abundant blessings for the descendants.
- Sixthly, Devotional prayers: The service may continue with a brief devotion (e.g., the Rosary), concluding prayers, and a hymn.
- Seventhly, Procession: After the service, the minister invites the family to proceed with the *Sijagaron* and coffin from the house to the courtyard.

Intended outcomes include: (a) all present recognise the body as sanctified by God; (b) the family and attendees respectfully express gratitude to the deceased; (c) traditional rituals, offered to God, bear transformative power for the family; and (d) the *Saur Matua* ceremony is experienced as a celebration of faith and thanksgiving for God’s love. This reflects the aim

of inculturation: that local culture, with its values, inspires and strengthens the content of faith—the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Martasudjita 2021, p. 26), and fosters transformation into grateful, generous people (Martasudjita 2021, p. 27).

CONCLUSION

The ritual “*Pasahat Ulos Pucca as Ulos Saput*” within the *Saur Matua* tradition can fittingly be incorporated into the Catholic Church’s Blessing of the Body as an inculturation effort. Theologically and liturgically, the tradition holds special meaning. The Blessing of the Body helps Batak Toba Catholics experience the traditional rites in a sacred manner, recognising the body as consecrated by God. Liturgically and pastorally, the blessing of the *Si-jagaron* further elevates this symbol’s transformative significance for the family. We therefore encourage Batak Catholics who celebrate *Saur Matua* to undertake this inculturation so that the ceremony may be seen, felt, interpreted and appreciated in the light of Catholic faith.

As the critical notes indicate, the Church should humbly recognize believers’ deep attachment to traditions passed down through generations. Attention to, love for, and loyalty to tradition remain integral to local faith lives. The Church must therefore accompany and guide believers so that their traditions do not conflict with Christian faith and teaching. Inculturation is one of the best ways to enable believers to practise their traditions without setting aside their faith. Inculturation, however, presupposes the Church’s willingness to encounter, dialogue with and value the faithful and their traditions. The ultimate goal is to enable culturally diverse believers to live their traditions with theological excellence, that is, in faith, hope, and love.

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The thematic issue on intercultural relations explores Africa through a wide range of narratives, showing how the continent has long been shaped by – and has helped shape – ongoing connections and movements of people, ideas, laws, and cultural forms across borders. A central concern is the tendency to frame Africa as a marginal “appendix” to global forces, rather than recognizing it as an active participant that co-produces transnational realities. The contributions also highlight three intertwined, enduring challenges – displacement, exile, and the afterlives of colonialism – which continue to reshape identity and both individual and collective memory, often through the practices of storytelling and translation. At the same time, the issue draws attention to immediate, lived pressures: local values can clash with humanitarian aid systems, stigma and discrimination persist where legal protections and healthcare support are uneven, and skilled professionals continue to leave despite government efforts to retain them. These tensions unfold against the backdrop of wider global crises, especially climate change and forced migration, which intensify inequalities while also forcing new questions about shared responsibility and change.

