



The Philosophy Of The Value Of Harmony Of Pela Gandong Maluku Culture In The Perspective Of Contextual Theology

Original Article

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Abstract

Religious and cultural tensions are not barriers but can facilitate religious people's expression of their faith. The theological context seeks to understand the Christian faith as a theological imperative. The Pela-Gandong tradition is an important element in Maluku culture that maintains kinship between Christian and Muslim communities. This tradition resolves conflicts, which contain the moral values of togetherness, unity, respect, equality, and peace. Misunderstanding leads to tension and conflict, especially between Christians and Muslims. After the conflict in Maluku in 1999-2002, the community realised the importance of revitalising the pela-gandong to maintain harmonious relations. The qualitative-inductive description methodology describes cultural and religious patterns in the contextual theology of fraternity in Maluku. Religious conflicts show that ignoring kinship in the Pela-Gandong tradition can cause religious divisions. Maintaining pangolins is the responsibility of all parties, including religious institutions in Maluku.

Keywords: Contextual theology, Pela Gandong, Maluku

1. Introduction

In secular countries, many classical modernisation theories predict that the role of religion will disappear. However, religious people still play a significant role in people's lives. The situation in Indonesia was different, especially during the New Order period, when religion (especially Islam) was marginalised into the private sphere. However, this is not because Indonesian society is secular, but because of repression from the government. After the fall of the Suharto regime, religion again



filled the political space, and we can even talk about the existence of "too many religions" in the public sphere, often accompanied by acts of violence. This is worrisome, as revealed by the Wahid Institute based on their research on interreligious conflict (Malatuny Y, 2018).

This increasing religious life presents challenges for theology, considering the privatisation of religion, its association with violence, and the challenge for religion to adapt to a modern, democratic, and pluralistic society. The question is, what is the contribution of theological reflection to this challenge? One of the interesting things after the 1999-2002 Maluku conflict is the emergence of many regional songs that describe the values of brotherhood among the Moluccans, in the context of *pela* and *gandong* as a life system that transcends ethnic and religious boundaries. Old songs were sung again because they were considered to voice the values of brotherhood. In contrast, new songs were created to express the longing for brotherhood, which is an important value for the people of Maluku and remind them of the responsibility to maintain these values. For example, in the song "Tifa Damai", it is stated that "you are a Muslim, I am a Christian, but we are both brothers. Do not be hostile to each other for the pleasure of others" (Hasudungan A S. S., 2020). In the song "Biking Panas Pela", there is a reminder that "you should not forget the advice of your ancestors when making a promise through *pela*, which applies to posterity" and that "they do not see religion or village differences as a problem." The song "Ale Rasa Beta Rasa" also emphasises that "what you feel, I also feel, and we must support each other in joys and sorrows, without fighting because of religious differences." The messages in these songs feel more effective, considering that the Moluccans love music and songs. In Maluku, especially in Ambon, we often hear these songs at home and on public transportation, reflecting the reality of life in a cultural and religious diversity context (Masringor J, 2017).

The contextual approach in theology, culture, and religion is a radical breaking point from the traditional understanding of theology, but at the same time, it remains closely tied to tradition. Understanding theology as something contextual means affirming that it is new and traditional.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Pela Gandong* as a Socio-Cultural System of Harmony

Pela Gandong is a deeply rooted cultural institution among the Maluku people. It reflects intercommunal kinship, mutual support, and nonviolence. As an Indigenous peace system, it has long served as a moral framework for resolving conflict and strengthening social bonds across religious and ethnic divisions. Waworuntu, (2018) Emphasises the enduring relevance of Pela Gandong, particularly in maintaining communal solidarity amid socio-political shifts. Titaley, (2017) Further argues that Pela Gandong represents not merely a customary tradition but a living value system of harmony, offering a context-based solution to conflict transformation rooted in collective memory and spirituality.

2.2. Contextual Theology and Cultural Inculturation

Contextual theology recognises the importance of integrating local cultural values into Christian theological reflection. According to Mofu & Latuihamallo (2020) The inculturation of Pela Gandong into the church's liturgical and pastoral practices enables a theology grounded in peace, justice, and local wisdom. Such integration echoes the Gospel's call to reconciliation and inclusive love. Ririhena, (2022) It underscores how Pela Gandong resonates with biblical principles of shalom and forgiveness and demonstrates that Indigenous practices can become theological expressions in their own right when rooted in lived experience.

2.3. Pela Gandong in Post-Conflict Reconciliation in Maluku

The post-conflict reconstruction of Maluku after the 1999–2002 interreligious violence has seen a resurgence of Pela Gandong as a key reconciliation mechanism. The Ambon Peace Initiative (2016) documented how traditional rituals and adat-based reconciliatory ceremonies have been reactivated to rebuild trust and restore communal harmony. Leiwakabessy (2021) Notes that religious institutions, churches, and mosques have collaboratively used the narrative of Pela Gandong to foster interfaith dialogue and healing, showcasing its adaptive power in a post-conflict society.

2.4. Harmony as a Theological and Ethical Category

In contextual theology, harmony is a cultural virtue and a theological imperative. Pattinama & Souissa (2019) interpret the values embedded in Pela Gandong, mutual respect, restorative justice, and relational wholeness, as theological

virtues that reflect God's presence in the community. This theological framing positions Pela Gandong as a "social incarnation" of Christ's message of peace. Manuhutu (2023) offers a hermeneutical perspective, emphasising that Pela Gandong offers a local expression of the universal Christian mission of reconciliation and community-based ethics.

2.5. Gaps and Future Research Directions

Despite its socio-cultural significance, Pela Gandong remains underexplored as a theological category. More interdisciplinary research is needed, particularly between anthropology and contextual theology, to deepen our understanding of harmony as both a cultural practice and a theological vision. Future theological education in the region may benefit from including Pela Gandong in curricula that engage students in cultural identity and ecumenical spirituality.

3. Methods

The methodology employed in this paper adopts a descriptive inductive qualitative approach. The researcher will gather data on Pela Gandong through an inductive process and outline the problem's background in the introduction. Following this, the researcher will explore the significance and application within the lives of the Maluku people. In the results and discussion section, a thorough analysis will be conducted based on the principles of contextual theology, focusing on Pela Gandong within the frameworks of religion and culture, and its practical implications.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Philosophy Of Harmony Values

Indonesia is a diverse nation, encompassing numerous ethnicities, races, customs, and religions across thousands of islands. Christians constitute over 5% of the population. The concept of "harmony" encompasses several meanings: (1) living peacefully and without conflict; (2) achieving unity and agreement. (Bakri, 2015). It can be defined as: (1) reconciliation; (2) unifying one's heart. Harmony refers to: (1) living conditions in balance; (2) a sense of mutual harmony in communal living. It involves respecting others' freedoms and acknowledging differences as part of human rights. Social harmony fosters an atmosphere of brotherhood and unity

despite differences in ethnicity, race, culture, religion, and class. It also represents the reestablishment of harmony after conflict and reflects the ability and willingness to live peacefully.

A bridge must connect religious communities to cultivate harmony in Indonesia's varied society. Thus, Christian communities should be mindful of their universal role in God's saving work and recognise the significant theological role of other religions in salvation. Christian societies must be inclusive and collaborate with other communities in divine missions. Acknowledging the role of other religions in salvation does not signify a mission's failure but rather illustrates the church's universality. The awareness that the eschatological age is not solely the church's endeavour indicates that other religions strive towards the Creator's perfection. This open sense of shared faith confirms the church's recognition of the universal scope of God's salvation work. Consequently, engaging in dialogue with other religions reflects a Christian theological awareness. (Wakano, 2019) . During Minister of Religious Affairs Mukti Ali's tenure, promoting inter-religious dialogue was emphasised and programmed to foster harmony in religious life, primarily facilitating such dialogues.

4.2. Harmony In The Perspective Of Social Theology

Social harmony is characterised by a peaceful and cooperative coexistence where conflicts are absent and individuals agree to work towards the common good. In a state of social harmony, people live together without suspicion, showing mutual respect, and collaborating for shared benefits. Harmony is an attitude rooted in the genuine desire to engage as fellow human beings without external pressure. Society comprises individuals interacting within a specific cultural framework, united by a shared sense of identity. Religious communities, such as Christians, are groups driven by religious motivations, often organised into institutions with intense devotion to their beliefs. (Karamoy, 2017) . Ed Dayton described "Group People" as individuals connected and influenced by shared language, religion, ethnicity, region, and occupation. They may find accepting new cultures or religions, like Christianity, challenging. Conversely, "The Unreached People" are groups where Christians have limited ability to evangelise due to strong cultural bonds. (Tanuwidjaja & Uda, 2020).

Three key social resources influence social change: local ideologies and traditions, social relations, and local institutions serving community interests. This paper will focus on local institutions that benefit the community. Over time, various forms of

local institutions have evolved and adapted to address ecological, social, political, and economic issues. These institutions are crucial in actively contributing to societal progress.

4.3. **Pela Gandong Culture As A Medium For Building Harmony**

The people of Maluku, particularly in Central Maluku, believe that they originate from a place known as Nunusaku. They view Nunusaku, a sacred mountain on Seram Island, as their ancestral homeland. They also believe that the customary laws practised across Maluku derive from Nunusaku. For them, Nunusaku is considered "Nusa Ina" (Mother Island). From this origin, they migrated to various areas on Seram, Lease (Haruku, Saparua, Nusalaut) islands, and Ambon. They were subsequently divided into two major groups: Patasiwa (meaning nine) and Patalima (meaning five). This division extends beyond Central Maluku to Southeast and North Maluku as well. Alternate terms for Patasiwa and Patalima include ulisiwa, ulilima, or lorsiwa, lorlima. These groups' customary laws, rituals, and kinship patterns are based on nine for Patasiwa and five for Patalima. For instance, the Patalima group makes payments or fines in multiples of five, while the Patasiwa group uses multiples of nine. Patasiwa is further categorised into white patasiwa and black patasiwa.

Nunusaku also provides a belief system referred to as the Nunusaku religion, which is the original faith of the Maluku people, especially in Central Maluku. This religion is a unifying factor among tribes, even though they have dispersed across different regions. Before Pela emerged as a tribal bond, trust in Nunusaku had already established connections between tribes. American anthropologist Dieter Bartels, who has studied Moluccan culture and religion, observed that pela functioned to "preserve" the Nunusaku religion among the tribes of Central Maluku and Ambon. He noted that the Nunusaku religion lacked formal structure, leaders, or worship sites. Consequently, it can be said that Pela continued the role of the Nunusaku religion in uniting tribes in Maluku, even those adhering to other religions like Christianity and Islam. (Hasudungan & Sartika, 2019) . Despite its traditional nature, pela is recognised as a sacred bond that ensures unity beyond tribal and religious differences, supported by historical agreements among tribal leaders.

Regarding preserving unity values within the Maluku community, Nus Ukru's research on indigenous rights, particularly of the Huaulu tribe, believed to be the ancestors of all ethnic groups in Seram, provides insightful observations. Nus Ukru

notes that the concluding part of the Huaulu tribe's prayer during the Asua rite states: "... u'helai si-shiva silima sikusan, u'helai siwaresian...!" which translates to requesting divine protection for the salvation of all tribal groups in Seram. (Safi, 2017) . This reflects their deep commitment to unity and peace, motivating them to resolve conflicts nonviolently.

4.4. GANDONG

The term "Gandong," derived from the word "womb," is conceptually distinct from *pela*, although it is sometimes used interchangeably. Gandong is occasionally viewed as a form of *pela*. When two or more regions establish a bonding relationship, it is based on the belief that they share a common ancestor. For instance, the Ouw people in Saparua consider the Sei people in Ambon as their *gandong* because they believe they stem from the same lineage. If the Ouw village becomes a Christian village and the Sei village becomes an Islamic village, this development occurred following the introduction of Christianity to Maluku. Nonetheless, they maintain that their origins are from the same place, particularly the same lineage. In *gandong* relationships, marriage between individuals from these bonded communities is prohibited. The prohibitions and sanctions in a *gandong* relationship are similar to those in a *pela* relationship.

As a result, the terms *pela* and *gandong* are often used interchangeably, even though their origins differ. Dieter Bartels also categorises *gandong* as a type of *pela*, seen in the relationships among the regions of Aboru, Kariu, Booi, and Hualoi, as well as between Kulur and Oma. According to Odu Leatemia, a traditional leader from Ihamahu, regions in a *gandong* relationship originate from the same tau house or clan. For example, the lands of Ihamahu, Iha in Hatawano, and Iha in West Seram are all considered *gandong*, with origins tracing back to the kingdom of Ihayang, which covered nearly the entire island of Saparua. The descendants then dispersed to their current locations. Hence, it is common to find clans like Leatemia, Haulusi, Luhulima, Patiiha, and Putuhena in Ihamahu, Hatawano, and West Seram. Additionally, there are regions with both Islamic and Christian connections, such as Pelauw (Islam) and Titawaai (Christianity), Batumerah (Islam) and Ema (Christianity), Seith (Islam) and Ouw (Christianity), and Morrela (Islam) and Waai (Christianity) (Wenno & Laili, 2019).

4.5. PELA

Pela represents the collective history of the Maluku people, particularly in Central Maluku, embodying the values of human interaction in both harmonious and challenging situations. Pela signifies a communal bond rather than an individual relationship. Historically, pela has functioned as a means to address tensions and resolve life issues by focusing on improving interpersonal relations. In the local language of Central Maluku, pela translates to "best friend" or "brother," denoting that individuals within a pela relationship view each other as brothers, regardless of their age or social status. Additionally, pela can imply "finished" or "stopped," signifying the resolution of conflicts between regions. Despite its significance, the Maluku people do not extensively delve into the profound meaning of pela; it is primarily seen as a term denoting the bond between two or more regions. The exact origins of Pela are unclear, but many bands date back to 1625, during the Hongitochten period and the resistance against Dutch colonialism. More recent Pela bonds include those between Mamala and Lateri in 1957, and Galala and Hitu Lama in 1959. Some scholars suggest that Pela relationships existed before foreign contact, possibly among small, nomadic, and often conflict-prone groups on Seram Island. When conflicts could not be resolved through warfare, these groups agreed to end hostilities and maintain peace. As these groups migrated to other areas, including Saparua, Haruku, and Nusalaut, they continued to uphold this tradition to ensure peaceful coexistence. (Hartimah et al., 2021).

The rituals associated with forming a pela bond include "pela tanpa betel," which involves the distribution of betel nuts, and "pela drinking blood," where the bond is solidified with blood mixed with *sopi*, a local alcoholic beverage. Another form, "coral pela," is established when two leaders cannot defeat each other on a reef. The historical context surrounding the establishment of Pela highlights its intended purpose. Pela was established to resolve conflicts and foster peace between warring regions. Its creation was often driven by a shared sense of oppression, particularly evident during the Hongi expeditions between Kilang and Werinama. Additionally, Pela was formed to mitigate hostilities, such as those between pro-Netherlands and anti-Netherlands regions, exemplified by the countries of Abubu and Liliboi. Economic difficulties also prompted the formation of Pela, as in the case of Akoon and Apisano. In the 20th century, many people were based on material needs, such as those between Ihamahu and Kaibobu or Kailolo and Tihulale. Pela was also used to

strengthen familial ties, seen in relationships between Kariu, Booi, and Hualoi, or between Islamic and Christian Sirisori and Hutumuri. Some perla originated from personal relationships, such as romantic bonds, which later became formalised connections between regions. (Ismail et al., 2022).

4.6. Religion And Challenges To The Preservation Of Pela And Gandong Values

Pela-Gandong is a foundational system of intercommunal cooperation and brotherhood in Maluku, fostering harmony between ethnic and religious groups. Despite socio-political shifts, these traditional values continue to strengthen social cohesion. The communities involved in Pela-Gandong survive and thrive, reflecting the system's cultural resilience. However, when rigidly interpreted, religion can threaten the continuity of Pela-Gandong. Religious identities sometimes take precedence over cultural solidarity. For instance, some Muslims and Christians now prioritise intra-religious relations, perceiving interfaith bonds as contradictory to religious doctrine. This shift reduces the significance of Pela-Gandong in daily life and interfaith engagement. (Piris & Tilaar, 2013).

Policies from national religious authorities such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) fatwa prohibiting Muslims from wishing Christians a Merry Christmas have worsened this rift. These rulings neglect the humanistic values embedded in the tradition of mutual respect and celebration across faiths. Historically, Christian communities received educational advantages under colonial rule, which sometimes caused tension. Nevertheless, many Christians tried to help their Muslim brothers gain access to similar opportunities. Despite these efforts, the church largely failed to embrace Pela-Gandong as a theological or ecclesiastical value, often relegating it to academic interest rather than spiritual praxis. (Pattiasina et al., 2018) Some Protestant communities view the belief in ancestral or supernatural sanctions within Pela-Gandong as conflicting with monotheism. The Protestant Church in Maluku has traditionally resisted such elements, associating them with dualism or ancestor worship (Pattiasina, 2018). In Islam, purification movements have led to the exclusion of local traditions like Pela-Gandong, with external Islamic leaders often disregarding these cultural values as irrelevant. This trend shows a growing disconnection between religion and local wisdom, weakening community identity.

4.7. **Pela And Gandong: An Example Of Contextual Theology Application**

Contextual theology is often perceived as traditional, yet its essence lies in its connection to specific cultural and religious contexts. While it may appear distinct from classical or traditional theology, every genuine theology has always been grounded in its unique cultural and religious context. Contextualization is thus an essential condition for any authentic theological reflection. In contextual theology, the influence of practices like *pela* and *gandong* is evident in various meaningful aspects of life.

4.8. **CULTURAL VALUES OF COMMUNAL LIVING**

In Maluku, communal and family values are crucial in shaping life perspectives. The significance of these values is closely linked to an individual's connection to family ties, which are primarily identified through clan affiliations. Through these clans, a person's relationship with their family is established and preserved. An individual's sense of identity and belonging is deeply tied to their participation in the community. (Rumlus, 2023). For the people of Maluku, severing family connections is akin to being cut off from ancestral heritage. The local saying, "manyangkal orang tatau or manyangkal keluarga is the same as manyangkal tete nene ancestors," underscores that failing to acknowledge family bonds equates disregarding one's ancestral legacy. This reflects the belief that detaching from family ties amounts to ignoring the inheritance of one's ancestors.

4.9. **Supportive Bonds In Maluku: The Role Of Pela And Gandong**

On the other hand, individuals find greater security when they are closely connected to their family and face challenges together. This sense of shared responsibility and mutual support is a hallmark of family life throughout the Maluku archipelago. It embodies unity, openness, and willingness to confront difficulties together. In Maluku, decisions that impact daily life are often made with a strong emphasis on familial togetherness. People might feel hurt or excluded if they are not involved in family matters. For instance, a family member could be offended if they are not informed about a relative's upcoming marriage. This notification is not merely a formality but a gesture of respect and acknowledgement of one's role within the family. (Lestari, 2019). Family events, particularly weddings and funerals, are significant occasions for bringing the extended family together. Hence, weddings are

often grand celebrations involving both the groom's and bride's families. The value placed on family ties is also evident in the *pela-gandong* relationship. This bond illustrates that individuals from countries with a *Pela-Gandong* connection—Islamic or Christian—are considered integral parts of one another's lives. Reflecting Martin Buber's philosophy, the I-Thou relationship signifies that "I" is part of "you," and "you" is part of "me." This interconnectedness means that all share the burdens of one. Consequently, the mutual responsibility to support each other within the *pela* or *gandong* relationship is highly valued.

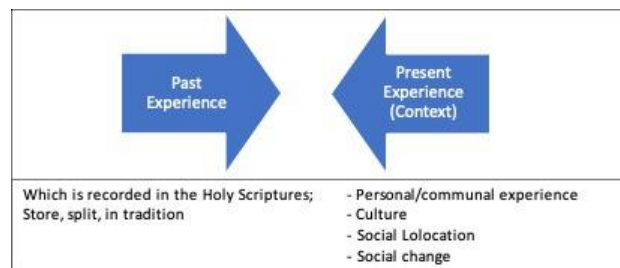
4.10. The Role Of Religious Interaction And Contextual Theology

The application of contextual theology is vividly illustrated in the construction of the Zainal Abidin Mosque in Hualoy during the 1970s. Four *gandong* communities, Booi, Aboru, Kariu, and Hualoy, actively contributed to the mosque's construction during this initiative. Each community was responsible for erecting one of the four main pillars of the mosque, symbolising unity through shared spiritual and cultural commitments (Kenapy, 2023). A construction committee representing the BAKH *gandong* network was also established, including diaspora members from the Netherlands. They contributed both financially and architecturally. A personal testimony from a *gandong* member recounts a spontaneous moment of solidarity. While fundraising in Ambon, he encountered youths from Hualoy and immediately joined their effort to raise funds for the mosque. This interreligious and intercultural cooperation, grounded in the *Pela Gandong* tradition, reflects the theological embodiment of unity and peace. It counters prevailing narratives that associate mosques with extremism or jihad, instead highlighting their function as symbols of community-building and interfaith solidarity (Aponno, 2017). During the Maluku religious conflict (1999–2004), the same *gandong* spirit was evident. When Kariu was attacked, Hualoy responded with collective grief and moral support, demonstrating the depth of emotional and spiritual ties that transcend religious divisions.

4.11. CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Contextual theology offers a renewed understanding of theological reflection by integrating Scripture and tradition, historically constant, and contemporary human experience as a valid source of theology (Aponno, 2017). This marks a significant departure from classical theology, which often emphasised objectivity and universality. Unlike traditional approaches, contextual theology embraces culture, history, and contemporary worldviews as formative influences in the development of theology. It affirms that theology emerges from three interrelated sources: Scripture,

tradition, and lived human experience, each shaped by its surrounding context. This approach acknowledges construct meaning within specific cultural frameworks. Charles Kraft captures this dynamic by asserting that human understanding of reality is always culturally conditioned. While God exists beyond culture, human beings interpret divine reality within the limits of their cultural, psychological, and social conditions. Hence, theology cannot be entirely objective; rather, it reflects the contextual filters through which people perceive the transcendent. In practising contextual theology, attention is given to past faith experiences recorded in Scripture and tradition and current experiences and contexts. This dual focus ensures that theology remains true to historical faith while being relevant and personal in the present. Contextual theology thus navigates the interplay between tradition and contemporary context, striving to make faith more applicable and vibrant in today's world.



While also being relevant and personal in the present. Contextual theology thus navigates the interplay between tradition and contemporary context, striving to make faith more applicable and vibrant in today's world. The image illustrates that present experiences are heavily shaped by personal history, cultural background, social status, and societal changes, all interlinked with past experiences. Thus, discussions about Pela Gandong will naturally reflect historical and contemporary perspectives, particularly concerning its role in religious understanding and contextual theology.

The conflict in Maluku between 1999 and 2002 raised questions about the effectiveness of Pela Gandong as a system and its role in fostering brotherhood among the Moluccans. Critics argue that if Pela Gandong were truly effective, such conflicts would not have persisted. Conversely, some believe the conflict occurred because the Moluccans had strayed from the core brotherhood values inherent in

Pela Gandong tradition. (Wabaluwu et al., 2023). From this perspective, the conflict underscores the critical importance of Pela Gandong, not merely as a cultural artefact but also as a fundamental value for living. Despite the lack of a fully coordinated effort to reinforce Pela Gandong, the desire to revive and strengthen it is evident through various Malukan and government initiatives. These include the "biking panas pela" ceremony and the establishment of Latupati, a traditional leadership role aimed at supporting the core values of the Maluku people. During the "biking panas pela" ceremony, communities with fraternal ties reconvene to renew their brotherly commitments and mend any relationships that may have been strained by conflict. This event serves as a reminder of the foundational brotherly values and emphasises the importance of applying these values in everyday life to preserve and enhance the established fraternal bonds.

5. Conclusion

To understand Maluku's identity, one must grasp the essence of Pela-Gandong, a cultural and religious bond that transcends faith differences and fosters intercommunal unity. Peacebuilding in Maluku is deeply rooted in traditions where communities jointly build places of worship, exemplifying the integration of custom and religion. From an ethnographic perspective, Maluku culture is sustained by traditional cosmology and religious identity, which have remained intact despite social changes. However, harmony must not be limited to Pela-Gandong groups alone; inclusive peace efforts should also reach beyond those networks. Contextual theology plays a crucial role by combining three key sources: Scripture, tradition, and lived experience. It affirms that theology must be grounded in local realities and shaped by historical and cultural contexts, especially in multireligious societies like Maluku. The tension between religion and local custom is unproductive. Both have unique values and should not be framed in opposition. Local traditions like Pela-Gandong are not inferior to religion but serve as bridges for interfaith dialogue and peace. In response to external cultural dominance, young Ambonese Muslim intellectuals have introduced the "Islam Mazhab Ambon"—a localised expression of Islam that honours indigenous culture. They argue that detaching from local identity in favour of Arab norms risks severing the spiritual roots of the people. However, such efforts require mutual engagement. The church must also embrace Pela-Gandong, not just as a tool for evangelism, but as a vital element of its justice, peace, and reconciliation mission. Contextual theology thus finds its embodiment in the harmonious coexistence between culture and faith in daily life.

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