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Between Ancestral Mediation and Christian Discernment: Pig-Liver Divination in Minahasa

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Abstract: Indigenous Christian communities negotiate inherited rituals as living sites of authority, identity, and moral order. This article examines pig-liver inspection in the Ator Kampung tradition of Danowudu, North Sulawesi, exploring how members and leaders of the Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM) in Danowudu discern its relationship with Christian faith. It presents a reflexive thematic reanalysis of a qualitative case-study corpus collected between October 2025 and April 2026, comprising interviews with 11 purposively selected participants, contextual observations, and documentary materials. As the ritual has not been performed since 2019, its description constitutes retrospective reconstruction rather than direct observation. Five themes emerge: the liver as a communal diagnostic medium; competing religious authorities; four congregational positions; institutional ambiguity; and enduring social values, including solidarity, gratitude, historical memory, and communal responsibility. The findings suggest that the central tension extends beyond Christianity versus culture to competing claims to authority in disclosing truth and directing communal life through Scripture, prayer, ancestors, customary leaders, and material signs.

Keywords: *Ancestor veneration; contextual theology; divination; indigenous Christianity; religious authority.*

INTRODUCTION

Across many indigenous Christian settings, conversion has not produced a clean replacement of earlier religious worlds. Christian practices, ancestral memories, ritual specialists, sacred objects and inherited moral obligations continue to interact in forms that are neither simply syncretistic nor fully separable. Scholarship on vernacular and indigenous Christianity increasingly emphasises the agency of local communities in adopting, reshaping and sometimes resisting received Christian forms. Dale's account of West Papuan Christianity, for example, demonstrates that indigenous communities do not merely undergo Christian transformation; they also transform Christianity from within (Dale 2024). Comparable Indonesian studies show that local wisdom, inherited ritual and Christian interpretation remain intertwined in Nias, Toraja, Kaili, South Sulawesi and Minahasa.

Several studies in Indonesia demonstrate that the encounter between local wisdom, ancestral rituals, and Christian interpretations takes place through processes of theological and cultural negotiation. In Nias, this encounter is reflected in practices of ancestor veneration and the integration of amaedola (traditional proverbs) into pastoral contexts (Hulu and Daeli 2025), in Toraja, it is evident in the theological reinterpretation of the Rambu Solo' ritual (Lintin and Natar 2022). In Central Sulawesi, it emerges through biblical interpretations of the Raego tradition among the Kaili and Kulawi communities (Siahaya, Tiwery, and Sunkudon 2026). And in Minahasa, it is expressed through theological reflections on the Lumales tradition (Mawuntu, Tumiwa, and Runtuwene 2025) and the encounter between Christianity and indigenous religious beliefs (Sarimbangun 2024). These studies demonstrate that local traditions are not merely cultural inheritances but also serve as spaces of encounter, negotiation, and the formation of contextual expressions of Christian faith.

These interactions are especially contested when a ritual claims access to otherwise unavailable knowledge. Divination may be defined broadly as a socially authorised practice for producing knowledge about uncertain causes, hidden conditions or possible courses of action. It need not be reduced to prediction of the future. Hong and Henrich describe divination as an epistemic practice whose persistence can be related to its capacity to organise decision-making and reduce uncertainty (Hong and Henrich 2021). Zeitlyn similarly treats divination as a mode of reasoning situated within cultural systems of evidence and interpretation. Material religion scholarship further cautions that religious immediacy is commonly produced through media: texts, bodies, sounds, substances and objects that make transcendent claims experientially available (Meyer 2011). Theologically, therefore, the issue is not only whether a ritual is 'cultural' or 'religious', but how its media acquire authority, who may interpret them and which source of truth is treated as normatively binding.

The case considered here is the inspection of a pig's liver within Ator Kampung, a Danowudu tradition associated with ordering, protecting and morally reorienting village life. Danowudu is located in Bitung, North Sulawesi, and identifies itself as a customary village within the wider Minahasan cultural world. Participants described the ritual as occurring historically when repeated deaths, illness, conflict or other disturbing events suggested that the village was 'not in order'. In more recent practice it was linked to the village anniversary. A healthy village pig was slaughtered; its liver was placed on a plate and interpreted by a tonaas, a customary ritual specialist. The condition of the liver was said to disclose whether the village was harmonious or troubled and to indicate the causes of communal disorder. The wider rite included prayer, Minahasan songs, offerings or ritual media, movement towards village boundaries, public counsel and a communal meal.

The ritual is not a preserved pre-Christian form isolated from church life. Participants reported the inclusion of Christian prayer and the Bible, while also

describing the invocation of ancestors and kampetan, a condition in which an ancestor is believed to speak through the tonaas. This juxtaposition makes the practice analytically significant. Scripture, prayer, ancestral mediation, the specialist's embodied state and the organ's material signs are brought into a single ritual field. The resulting controversy is not adequately captured by a binary opposition between a pure Christian faith and an external culture. It is a conflict over religious authority, mediation and the criteria by which a community recognises guidance as trustworthy. Recent studies of spirit possession and ancestral practice underline the need for careful, non-reductive interpretation (Perdomo 2025), shows that possession idioms may be resilient, socially generative and internally contested rather than mere residues of an earlier religion (Testoni et al. 2025). Athough working in psychological contexts different from Minahasa, likewise caution against responses that either affirm possession claims uncritically or dismiss them without attending to participants' spiritual and social worlds. An ethnographic-theological approach therefore distinguishes emic claims – what participants believe is occurring – from the researcher's analytical and normative evaluation (Spickard 2021) (Martí 2022). In this article, kampetan is described as ancestral embodiment as understood by participants; no empirical claim is made that an ancestor objectively entered a participant's body.

Within Minahasan theology, scholarship has already identified possibilities for dialogue between Christianity and indigenous conceptions. Rumbay and Siahaya explore Opo Empung as a point of conversation for culturally rooted Christianity (Rumbay and Siahaya 2023a), while Berdame, Wagiu and Pinontoan examine how Minahasan terms for divinity entered contextual Christological translation (Wagiu, Berdame, and Pinontoan 2026). Rumbay, Hutagalung and Siagian call for a Nusantara contextual theology that takes local experience seriously (Rumbay et al. 2023), and Jura et al. demonstrate that Minahasan celebrations have been transformed through religious and governmental intervention (Jura, Simatupang, and Rumbay 2024). Wagiu, Berdame and Pinontoan further show how nineteenth-century Minahasan intermediaries translated Christian teaching within indigenous cultural horizons. (Wagiu et al. 2026) These studies establish that Minahasan Christianity has long been mediated through local language, symbols and agents. They do not, however, resolve how a church should discern a ritual that attributes diagnostic or directive authority to ancestral speech and organ signs.

Two risks attend theological responses to such a practice. The first is total rejection, which may protect doctrinal boundaries but erase the ritual's social functions, local history and the agency of those who inhabit the culture. The second is uncritical accommodation, which may redescribe every inherited practice as culturally valuable without examining the theological authority it exercises. Hiebert's critical contextualisation remains useful because it refuses both imposed rejection and indiscriminate acceptance: communities should understand a practice in its own

terms, evaluate it through Scripture and theological reflection, and formulate contextually responsible alternatives (Hiebert 1987). Bevans similarly insist that theology is produced through a disciplined conversation between Christian sources and concrete contexts (Bevans 1985). Yet contextual theology must also ask whose voices control that conversation and whether 'transformation' merely conceals ecclesial domination. The present study contributes to this discussion by returning to congregational voices rather than deciding the ritual's meaning in advance. It also responds to recent empirical work in GMIM. Ratag, Sendow and Lalira show that GMIM leaders hold divergent, internally coherent theological postures rather than a single institutional viewpoint (Tombeng and Lalira 2026). Tombeng and Lalira likewise find that GMIM devotional discourse can possess strong internal ethical resources while remaining limited in its engagement with broader social plurality (Tombeng and Lalira 2026). These studies suggest that ecclesial practice should be analysed as a field of implicit and competing theologies, not assumed to be uniform. In Danowudu, the same congregation contains preservationist, rejecting, ambivalent and transformative interpretations of Ator Kampung.

The research gap is consequently both empirical and conceptual. Empirically, published Minahasan theology has concentrated more frequently on divine names, celebration, education, communal values and broad culture–gospel relations than on an organ-reading rite reconstructed from the perspectives of those who practise, tolerate and reject it. Conceptually, the language of syncretism or balance is too imprecise to explain why the same use of a Bible is judged by one participant as Christian confirmation and by another as theological misdirection. A focus on authority makes those disagreements intelligible. It identifies the operative relations among medium, interpreter, validating community and required action, and it permits a more exact theological judgement than a catalogue of cultural elements. This article argues that the controversy surrounding pig-liver inspection is fundamentally a negotiation of epistemic and religious authority. The liver is not merely an animal organ and the tonaas is not merely a cultural performer; together with the Bible, prayer and ancestral speech, they form a contested system for authorising knowledge about communal life. The study therefore asks: How do participants interpret the ritual's social and religious functions? Which sources of authority do they recognise or reject? What form of contextual Christian discernment can preserve communal goods without granting normative revelatory authority to organ signs or ancestral mediation? The aim is to develop an empirically grounded, critical-transformative framework for interpreting Ator Kampung within Minahasan Christianity. The Finding are limited to Danowudu Congregation and not generalizable to whole GMIM.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

The research is presented as a qualitative case study with a reflexive theological-ethnographic orientation. This designation is more methodologically accurate than a phenomenological claim because the available corpus documents multiple stakeholder interpretations of one bounded case rather than a formal phenomenological analysis of the essence of lived experience. Case study allows the ritual, congregation, customary institutions and village context to be analysed relationally, while ethnographic theology treats empirical accounts as capable of informing, unsettling and refining theological judgement (Swinton 2016). The article is a substantial reconceptualisation and reflexive thematic reanalysis of material originally assembled for an undergraduate theology thesis. It does not introduce new participants or claim data that are absent from that source. The reanalysis was undertaken to move from a question-by-question descriptive report towards an article-level argument about authority, mediation and contextual discernment.

The case is GMIM Eden Danowudu and the customary village context in which its members live. GMIM is the largest Protestant denomination historically rooted in Minahasa. Ator Kampung belongs to the customary sphere rather than to the official liturgy of GMIM, although congregants, church office-bearers and local officials may be present within the same social field. The source study was conducted from October 2025 to April 2026. Participants consistently stated that the pig-liver ritual had last been performed in 2019 and had not resumed during the Covid-19 period or the subsequent internal difficulties of the customary council. All 11 participants gave informed consent for interview and publication of anonymized data. As this reanalysis uses the same dataset for the same research purpose, no new ethics approval was required. Accordingly, the study did not observe a live performance. Contextual observation concerned the locality and documentary materials, while the ritual sequence was reconstructed retrospectively from interviews and photographs. This limitation is stated explicitly to avoid conflating documentary reconstruction with participant observation.

Participants And Sampling

Eleven participants were selected purposively because they represented positions directly relevant to the case: a tonaas; two members of the customary council; a village official who also held a church role; a former congregational chair and pastor; church elders and a deacon; young congregants; and an ordinary congregant. The original source named participants. For journal publication, the present article uses codes P1–P11 and broad role descriptors to reduce unnecessary exposure of identifiable opinions in a small community. The sample was designed for information richness and perspective variation, not statistical representation. Data

saturation was not claimed. Table 1 summarises the analytic roles without reproducing personal identifiers.

TABLE 1: Participant roles and analytic positions.

Code	Broad role	Principal analytic position
P1	Customary ritual specialist (tonaas)	Preservation; ancestral mediation
P2	Village official and church office-bearer	Conditional accommodation; symbolic modification
P3	Church elder	Conditional accommodation
P4	Customary council officer	Preservation
P5	Congregant	Neutral accommodation; thanksgiving reinterpretation
P6	Church elder	Theological rejection; selective retention
P7	Former congregational chair and pastor	Selective transformation / discontinuation
P8	Young congregant	Theological rejection
P9	Young congregant and cultural activist	Preservation
P10	Customary council member	Preservation; diagnostic interpretation
P11	Deacon / church office-bearer	Theological rejection; transformation

Data Generation And Corpus

The source study used semi-structured interviews, contextual observation and documentary material. Interview questions addressed the ritual sequence; perceived meanings, purposes and benefits; relationships with Christian faith; personal approval or rejection; the church's response; and whether the ritual should be retained, modified or discontinued. The interview schedule developed during conversations, allowing follow-up questions. The thesis appendices contain textual records of participant responses. Because the source does not document audio-recording procedures or a verbatim transcription protocol, this article treats the material as interview records rather than claiming audio-verified transcripts. Quotations were translated from Indonesian and Manado Malay into British English and lightly edited for readability without changing their substantive meaning. Local terms were retained where translation would flatten their ritual significance. Documentary data included photographs of earlier performances and local historical accounts. Photographs were used to clarify ritual arrangement and participation, not as independent proof of supernatural claims. No participant photograph is reproduced in this article, thereby avoiding additional permission and identifiability concerns.

Reflexive Thematic Reanalysis

The corpus was reanalysed using a reflexive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's emphasis on interpretive coherence rather than mechanical coding reliability (Braun and Clarke 2021). First, the interview records and relevant documentary sections were read repeatedly. Secondly, initial codes were generated around ritual media, causation, authority, communal function, Christian judgement, institutional response and proposed futures. Thirdly, codes were clustered into candidate themes. Fourthly, the themes were tested against divergent and minority cases, particularly the contrast between cultural activists, customary leaders, church office-bearers and youth. Fifthly, the themes were refined around the article's central argument concerning authority. Finally, the results were brought into critical dialogue with contextual theology, material religion and scholarship on divination and possession. The analysis does not treat participant frequencies as population estimates. Terms such as 'several' or 'some' indicate patterns within the 11-person corpus. Contradictory accounts were retained as findings rather than resolved by majority vote. Reporting was informed by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research where the source record permitted (Tong, Sainsbury, and Craig 2007).

Reflexivity And Trustworthiness

The original researcher was an insider member of the study community; further identifying details are withheld for double-blind review. Insider status enabled cultural access and comprehension but also created risks of assumed knowledge, family or institutional influence, and premature harmonisation of competing claims. The reanalysis therefore distinguishes participants' descriptions from theological evaluation, foregrounds disconfirming cases and names the absence of live ritual observation. Reflexive ethnography is especially important in world Christianity because the researcher's ecclesial and cultural location affects what is heard, translated and judged (Spickard 2021). Trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation across different social roles, documentary comparison, transparent limitations and an audit trail linking each theme to participant records. The article does not claim neutrality; it claims accountable interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The pig's liver as a communal diagnostic medium

The analysis produced five interrelated themes. They show that participants were not simply divided between 'culture' and 'faith'. They differed over what the ritual knows, how it knows, who may interpret it and which parts of its social life can continue under Christian discernment. Participants repeatedly resisted describing the practice as fortune-telling. In their emic account, the liver 'inspects' or diagnoses the present condition of the village. A damaged, marked or perforated liver was associated with conflict, moral

disorder, recurrent death, illness or harmful spiritual disturbance; a sound liver indicated safety and social coherence. P10, a customary council member, stated: 'It is not prediction. It is an inspection, so that we know the cause and can repair the condition of the village.' The diagnostic claim extended beyond description to proposed action: counsel would be announced, residents urged to reconcile, and subsequent ritual stages undertaken at village boundaries.

The liver therefore operated as more than a sign. It condensed diffuse anxieties into a publicly interpretable object. Repeated deaths, crop failure, interpersonal hostility or an atmosphere of unease could be narrated as a village-wide condition rather than as isolated misfortune. The ritual generated a shared diagnosis and moral vocabulary. P1, the tonaas, explained that different appearances of the liver signalled different communal problems and were followed by advice concerning unity and village safety. The epistemic function and the moral function were inseparable: to 'read' the village was also to call it back into order.

Participants described a general sequence but stressed that it was not fixed. A customary committee selected a tonaas and prepared a healthy pig, frequently described as a black male, together with betel nut, betel leaf, lime, local drinks, coffee, tobacco, heirloom objects and a Bible. Prayer and the song Opo Wananatas could precede slaughter. The liver was removed without damage, placed on a white plate and interpreted. Results were publicly communicated, sometimes through a tolok or interpreter when the tonaas spoke an old Minahasan variety. The rite could continue to pasela-pasela, the village boundaries, and conclude with a communal meal. This variability indicates a living repertoire rather than a standardised liturgy.

Layered and competing religious authorities

The most consequential theme concerned the coexistence of several sources of authority. Participants described prayer to God, use of the Bible, invocation of ancestors, the tonaas's specialised gift, kampetan and the liver's physical signs. These were not always ranked in the same way. Cultural preservationists interpreted Christian prayer and the Bible as evidence that God remained the ultimate source. Critics argued that the practical source of guidance had shifted to ancestors and organ signs, irrespective of Christian elements added to the rite.

P1 described kampetan as a distinctive gift: 'The ancestor speaks directly. When I am possessed, I know nothing; afterwards the tolok tells me what was said.' Analytically, this statement should neither be dismissed nor converted into an objective claim of possession. It shows how authority is embodied and distributed. The tonaas does not present himself as the autonomous author of the message; authority is attributed to an ancestral speaker, while the tolok validates and translates the speech for the public. The chain of mediation – ancestor, tonaas, interpreter and community – produces a socially recognisable message.

The Bible's presence intensified rather than resolved the conflict. Participants reported that, during kampetan, a Bible might be opened and a passage read as confirmation or encouragement. For supporters, this demonstrated compatibility. For critics, it instrumentalised Scripture within an authority structure that Scripture did not govern. The same object could therefore authorise opposite conclusions. This finding illustrates why material inclusion of Christian symbols cannot by itself establish theological continuity. The question is how the symbol functions and which authority controls its interpretation.

Four congregational positions

Four positions emerged from the corpus. They are analytical types rather than rigid groups; an individual could combine elements of more than one position. First, cultural preservation treated the ritual as a defining inheritance of Danowudu. P9, a young cultural activist, argued that 'faith and culture must walk together' and that every cultural activity should begin with prayer to God. P1 and P10 likewise regarded transmission to younger generations as a communal obligation. In this position, the ritual's antiquity, distinctiveness and contribution to village identity weighed heavily. The use of prayer and the Bible was interpreted as evidence that preservation need not displace Christian faith.

Secondly, conditional accommodation accepted the ritual as culture only if it did not become the believer's primary ground of trust. P3, a church elder, said: 'From a Christian perspective it is no longer relevant; as culture, however, it may be preserved if life is not centred on it.' P5 adopted a deliberately neutral posture: 'I do not participate, but I do not reject it; it is the inheritance of my village.' This position protected cultural belonging while withholding full religious assent. Thirdly, theological rejection judged the ritual's means, not merely its excesses, to be incompatible with Christian faith. P8, a young congregant, stated: 'Guidance comes from God through prayer and Scripture, not from signs in a pig's liver.' P6 and P11 similarly argued that seeking direction from deceased ancestors displaced dependence on God. Their objection was epistemological and devotional: the practice assigned directive authority to a source that should not govern Christian life.

Fourthly, selective transformation attempted to preserve communal goods while changing the ritual's centre. P2, a village official and church office-bearer, considered the existing process 'somewhat contradictory' but proposed that it become symbolic. P5 suggested reframing it as thanksgiving expressed through local wisdom. A former pastor supported honouring ancestors and praising God but rejected idolatrous interpretation, recommending either discontinuation or substantial modification. Selective transformation was therefore not a compromise of convenience; it was an effort to separate identity-bearing forms from contested revelatory claims.

TABLE 2: Four positions in congregational interpretation.

Position	Authority logic	Preferred future
Cultural preservation	Ritual is inherited identity and communal wisdom; Christian prayer can coexist with it.	Continue and transmit the ritual.
Conditional accommodation	Culture may be respected, but personal trust must remain centred on God.	Preserve as culture with limits and explanation.
Theological rejection	Guidance from ancestors or liver signs displaces Scripture, prayer and dependence on God.	Discontinue the core practice.
Selective transformation	Communal goods are valuable, but the ritual's authority structure requires change.	Retain social forms; relocate authority and meaning.

Institutional ambiguity within the church

Participants did not identify a clear, formal GMIM position on the ritual. Several said that it had never been addressed specifically in preaching, catechesis or congregational discussion. Others recalled only informal sharing or general sermons against deviant beliefs. The ritual was commonly organised by customary actors outside the official church programme, allowing church and adat to 'walk separately' while the same people inhabited both spheres. This separation reduced direct institutional conflict but left congregants without shared criteria for discernment. P2 described pro and contra positions among religious figures during village-anniversary planning, after which Ator Kampung was assigned to a separate customary committee. P9 observed that some church leaders appeared to tolerate the practice without participating, while no one openly challenged it. Participants repeatedly requested deeper explanation from pastors and customary leaders. Institutional silence was thus not neutral: it transferred theological decision-making to individuals and informal networks.

Social Goods And The Desire For A Transformed Future

Even strong critics acknowledged that Ator Kampung contained social goods. Participants named communal gathering, shared food, reconciliation, village security, gratitude, respect for founders, historical memory, environmental responsibility and transmission of identity. These goods explain why direct prohibition would be socially costly. The ritual did not persist only because people believed the liver disclosed hidden conditions; it also staged Danowudu as a moral community responsible for its common life. At the same time, the corpus showed readiness for change. Suggestions included replacing diagnostic claims with communal self-examination, centring the event on thanksgiving to God, retaining processions and

shared meals, teaching the history of the village, allowing pastors to explain biblical texts rather than using randomly opened passages as signs, and conducting public dialogue before any revival of the ritual. The desired future was neither cultural amnesia nor unchanged repetition. It was a form of continuity in which the community could remember itself without making the liver or ancestral mediation a normative oracle.

DISCUSSION

Divination As Communal Epistemic Practice

The findings extend the understanding of divination beyond prediction. Participants' preferred language of 'inspection' identifies the practice as diagnosis: an attempt to discover hidden causes of communal disorder. This fits Hong and Henrich's account of divination as a cultural epistemic technology that can coordinate judgement under uncertainty (Hong and Henrich 2021). The liver converts morally and socially diffuse concerns into a visible medium, while the tonaas supplies an authorised interpretive grammar. Its force depends not on the organ alone but on a network of expectations, specialists, narratives and communal recognition. A material-religion perspective clarifies why the inclusion of a Bible does not settle the theological question. Media do not carry a single meaning independently of their use (Meyer 2011). In Ator Kampung, liver, body, speech, Bible, song and ritual substances together produce an experience of disclosure. The theological problem is therefore not the materiality of the practice as such. Christianity is also materially mediated through water, bread, wine, oil, text, touch and sound. The problem is the normative claim made through the medium and the authority structure that authenticates that claim.

Possession, Ancestry And The Ethics Of Representation

Kampetan should be approached as a serious participant category. Perdomo's (2025) analysis of collective possession shows that possession may carry historical memory, social critique and religious resilience simultaneously. It cannot be explained adequately as either deception or transparent supernatural fact. In Danowudu, kampetan relocates authorship from the living specialist to an ancestor and thereby intensifies the message's authority. It also makes the body a site where the village's past speaks to its present. Christian theological engagement must therefore distinguish ancestor remembrance, ancestor veneration and ancestral mediation. Respect for founders, gratitude for inherited land and public remembrance do not necessarily assign saving or revelatory power to ancestors. Setio demonstrates that biblical and Christian discussions of practices concerning the dead are more complex than simple proof-text prohibitions (Setio 2023), while shows that Christian communities in Nias continue to negotiate ancestral prayer through teaching rather than mere eradication. Yet complexity does not eliminate normative differentiation.

In this case, the decisive boundary concerns whether ancestral speech is treated as binding disclosure of God's will.

From Culture-Versus-Faith To A Conflict Of Authority

The four positions reveal a deeper structure than familiar culture typology alone can provide. Preservation resembles 'Christ of culture', rejection resembles 'Christ against culture', and selective transformation resembles 'Christ transforming culture'. However, mapping participants onto pre-existing types risks turning their voices into illustrations. The stronger analytic insight is that each position establishes a different hierarchy of authorities. Preservation assumes that ancestral and Christian sources can be mutually reinforcing. Conditional accommodation subordinates the rite to personal Christian commitment. Rejection recognises Scripture and prayer as exclusive guides. Selective transformation preserves social forms while relocating final authority to God as confessed through Christian communal discernment. This hierarchy also explains why adding Christian elements is insufficient. A prayer can open a rite while the liver remains the practical decision-maker; a Bible can be present while an ancestor controls its selection and meaning. Conversely, an inherited procession or communal meal can remain culturally Minahasan without claiming divine revelation. Theological evaluation must attend to function, not merely inventory. The relevant question is not 'Is a Bible present?' but 'What authorises the interpretation and what action becomes obligatory because of it?'

A Critical-Transformative Contextualisation

The findings support a critical-transformative model. It is contextual because it begins with thick description, insider meanings and local moral goods. It is critical because no cultural or ecclesial practice is immune from judgement. It is transformative because the goal is neither preservation of an untouched past nor replacement by an imported form, but a community-led reconfiguration of authority and practice. This approach develops Hiebert's critical contextualisation while remaining alert to decolonial concerns that outsiders may define transformation for indigenous people (Hiebert 1987). Dale's concept of endogenous transformation is pertinent: change should be worked out by Minahasan Christians and customary actors, not imposed as cultural deficiency (Dale 2024). Recent Indonesian contextual theology supports such dialogical reconstruction. Rumbay and Siahaya identify Minahasan divine language as a site of culturally generative conversation (Rumbay and Siahaya 2023b); Jura et al.describe transformation within celebration culture (Jura et al. 2024); Berdame et al. show that Christian translation in Minahasa has always involved semantic negotiation (Wagiu et al. 2026); and Depparua et al. propose a contextually sensitive but theologically discerning response to Kaili healing practice (Depparua, Tjandra, and Sunkudon 2026). The Danowudu case adds a sharper focus

on epistemic authority. Contextualisation becomes credible only when it states what may be retained, what requires reinterpretation and what should cease.

Biblical Discernment Without False Equivalence

The source thesis compared pig-liver interpretation with Urim and Thummim in Numbers 27:21 and used Acts 17 as a model of cultural engagement. These texts can support reflection, but they require tighter limits. A functional resemblance – both practices seek guidance – does not establish theological equivalence. Within the biblical narrative, Urim and Thummim operate inside Israel's covenantal and priestly order; their legitimacy derives from YHWH's authorised structure, not from an independently powerful object. In Ator Kampung, by contrast, participants describe signs interpreted through a customary specialist and, at times, ancestral embodiment. The comparison is therefore phenomenological rather than legitimating: it shows a common human desire for transcendent guidance while exposing different sources and structures of authority. Acts 17:16–34 also resists a purely affirmative use. Paul attends carefully to Athenian religious life and begins from an existing altar, but he does not merely baptise its meaning. He re-narrates creation, divine presence, ignorance, repentance and judgement in relation to the risen Christ. Contextual engagement is simultaneously hospitable and disruptive. Applied to Danowudu, the passage supports patient cultural listening and a refusal of contempt, while also requiring explicit theological claims about who God is and how divine guidance is discerned.

An Ecclesial Discernment Matrix

Table 3 translates the analysis into a practical three-level matrix. The first level retains goods that do not depend on contested revelation: communal meals, historical narration, public thanksgiving, reconciliation, mutual responsibility, care for village boundaries and the environment, and honouring founders without invoking them as divine authorities. The second level reinterprets forms whose meaning is not fixed: songs, processions, customary dress, symbolic objects and visits to boundary sites. Their continuation requires public explanation and communal consent. The third level discontinues or radically transforms practices that assign normative revelatory authority to the liver, random biblical opening controlled by an oracle logic, or ancestral speech treated as binding divine instruction.

This matrix is not a universal formula imposed on every Minahasan practice. It is a disciplined starting point for a congregational-customary forum. The forum should include tonaas and customary leaders, pastors and church office-bearers, women, youth, ordinary congregants and local historians. It should ask what the ritual has accomplished socially, what harms or fears it generates, which theological claims are non-negotiable, and what alternative practices can perform the social work

of reconciliation and memory. Such participatory discernment is more likely to produce durable transformation than either pastoral silence or unilateral prohibition.

A credible process would proceed in stages. Historical reconstruction should come first, allowing customary actors to explain changes in the rite and preventing present-day participants from treating one recent version as timeless tradition. The community should then distinguish description from confession: what participants say the ritual does is not yet the church's theological endorsement of that claim. Biblical and doctrinal discussion should follow, with attention to whole theological patterns rather than isolated proof texts. Finally, the community should design and trial alternative practices, evaluate their effects and revise them. This sequence protects both cultural knowledge and ecclesial accountability, and it turns contextualisation into a continuing communal discipline rather than a one-off judgement.

TABLE 3: Critical-transformative discernment matrix.

Level	Practices or goods	Discernment rationale
Retain	Communal meal; village history; public thanksgiving; reconciliation; mutual care; environmental and boundary responsibility.	These goods do not require the liver or ancestors to function as revelatory authorities.
Reinterpret through dialogue	Songs; processions; customary dress; heirloom objects; visits to village boundaries; remembrance of founders.	Meaning is not fixed. Public explanation, consent and Christian-customary co-discernment are required.
Discontinue or radically transform	Liver signs as binding divine diagnosis; ancestral speech as normative revelation; random Bible opening used as an oracle.	These practices create an authority structure that competes with Christian communal discernment centred on God, Scripture and accountable interpretation.

Implications for GMIM and world Christianity

The institutional ambiguity found in Danowudu is consistent with evidence that GMIM leadership contains multiple implicit theological orientations (Ratag, Sendow, and Lalira 2026). Diversity itself is not a failure. The failure lies in leaving congregants without transparent processes for evaluating contested practices. A contextual church requires more than occasional sermons warning against 'deviation'; it needs spaces in which customary actors can explain their practice and Christian communities can articulate criteria for discernment without humiliation.

The case also contributes beyond Minahasa. Across world Christianity, communities negotiate whether dreams, ancestors, healers, objects, bodily states and

inherited rituals may mediate divine guidance. The Danowudu material shows that these negotiations are not marginal survivals but sites where Christian authority is actively constructed. By analysing the practical hierarchy among Scripture, prayer, ancestors, specialists and material signs, researchers can move beyond the vague label of syncretism. The more precise questions are: Which medium is trusted? Who interprets it? What community validates the interpretation? What action follows? Which authority can correct the others? This authority-centred approach is also methodologically transferable. It can be applied without assuming that every community should reach the same theological outcome. In one setting, a dream may be tested within an accountable prayer community; in another, a healer's diagnosis may govern treatment; elsewhere, ancestral speech may authorise land, marriage or political decisions. Mapping the chain of authorisation permits comparison while respecting difference. It also helps theologians identify where pastoral care, doctrinal teaching, trauma awareness and protection from coercion are required. The framework therefore links contextual theology to practical governance: religious authority is not only an idea but a capacity to shape bodies, relationships, resources and communal futures.

Strengths And Limitations

The study's principal strength is its inclusion of divergent stakeholders within one bounded community, including a tonaas, customary actors, church office-bearers, youth and an ordinary congregant. It also preserves minority and ambivalent positions rather than manufacturing consensus. Its reflexive reanalysis provides a clearer conceptual contribution than the original descriptive organisation. Several limitations constrain the claims. The sample is small and role-based; it cannot represent all members of GMIM Eden Danowudu or Danowudu society. The ritual was not observed live, so its sequence and meanings are reconstructed retrospectively. The source does not document audio recording, formal transcription, interview duration or an ethics approval number. Insider relationships may have influenced participation and interpretation. English translations inevitably mediate local meanings. Finally, the study examines stated understandings rather than the effects of an actual transformed ritual. Future research should use prospective collaborative ethnography if the tradition is revived, include women and younger participants more extensively, and document a participatory discernment process over time.

CONCLUSION

Pig-liver inspection in Ator Kampung cannot be understood adequately as either harmless folklore or straightforward idolatry. Within participants' accounts, it is a communal diagnostic practice that makes hidden disorder visible, authorises counsel and reproduces Danowudu's historical identity. Its social efficacy helps explain why it remains meaningful even after years without performance. At the same time, the ritual's use of ancestral mediation, kampetan and organ signs raises a specific Christian theological question: which source may normatively disclose truth and direct communal life? The study identified four negotiated positions – preservation, conditional accommodation, theological rejection and selective transformation – and showed that each rests on a different hierarchy of authority. The most defensible contextual response is neither total cultural erasure nor the addition of Christian symbols to an unchanged oracle structure. A critical-transformative approach retains solidarity, gratitude, memory, reconciliation and responsibility; reinterprets culturally meaningful forms through explicit communal dialogue; and discontinues claims that assign binding revelatory authority to the liver or to ancestral speech. For GMIM Eden Danowudu, the immediate task is institutional rather than merely doctrinal. Pastoral and customary leaders need a transparent forum in which the ritual's history, social functions and theological claims can be examined together. Silence has allowed individuals to carry the burden of discernment alone. Participatory reconstruction can enable Minahasan Christians to remain accountable both to the gospel they confess and to the community whose history they inherit. In that process, culture is not treated as an enemy to be destroyed or a sacred whole beyond criticism, but as a living field in which authority, memory and faith are continually negotiated.

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