

Theological Analysis of Manggarai Traditional Marriage Rituals: An Ethnographic Study In Wae Rii Village, Manggarai Regency

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Abstract. This study explores the theological meanings embedded in Manggarai traditional marriage rituals through a qualitative ethnographic study conducted in Wae Rii Village, Manggarai Regency. The research addresses the tension between the ritual's theological ideals—unity, fidelity, and indissolubility—and the contemporary reality of marital conflict and domestic violence among younger couples. Data were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews with traditional elders, Catholic religious leaders, married couples, and young adults, and analyzed using thematic analysis within a contextual theological framework. The findings reveal that while Manggarai marriage rituals function as mediations of Christian covenantal values through indigenous symbols and communal practices, their moral formative power is weakened by ritual formalism and intergenerational gaps. The study underscores the need for liturgical inculturation and pastoral strategies to revitalize these rituals as living theological resources for marital integrity and social resilience.

Keywords: Manggarai marriage ritual, contextual theology, sacrament of marriage, liturgical inculturation

1 Introduction

Indonesia is endowed with a rich diversity of cultural traditions that continue to shape social and religious life. Among these traditions, indigenous marriage rituals occupy a central role, not only as cultural heritage but also as moral and spiritual frameworks that guide family life. In many indigenous societies, marriage is governed by customary law (*adat*), which functions as both a social norm and a moral authority regulating communal life [1].

In Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, traditional marriage rituals are deeply embedded within a Catholic worldview, reflecting a long-standing encounter between faith and local culture [5,6]. Previous studies have highlighted how Manggarai society integrates Christian teachings with ancestral wisdom, particularly in marriage practices [2–4]. However, most existing studies focus on the sociological, anthropological, or legal dimensions of marriage, leaving a gap in the exploration of its theological meaning as lived and interpreted within local ritual practices.

This study addresses a specific theological tension: the discrepancy between the enduring theological ideals embedded in Manggarai marriage rituals—such as unity, fidelity, and

indissolubility—and the contemporary reality of increasing domestic violence and divorce among young couples. While the ritual strongly affirms marriage as a lifelong and sacred covenant, these values are increasingly undermined by modernization, secularization, and generational shifts in moral understanding [6].

Wae Rii Village was deliberately selected as the research site because it is known for its strong adherence to ancestral marriage rituals, yet it simultaneously experiences the social challenges of marital conflict and domestic violence. This paradox makes Wae Rii a significant locus for theological reflection: it represents a community where ritual continuity coexists with moral fragmentation [5].

From a theological perspective, this study adopts a contextual theological framework, emphasizing inculturation and moral theology. It seeks to understand how traditional rituals function as a hermeneutic space where Christian faith, ancestral beliefs, and communal ethics intersect [6,7]. By examining prayers, symbols, and oral expressions within the marriage ritual, this research aims to uncover how theological meanings are transmitted—or fail to be internalized—by the younger generation.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on liturgical inculturation and contextual theology, demonstrating that traditional rituals are not merely cultural artifacts but theological resources capable of strengthening marital integrity and social resilience when their meanings are properly understood and lived [6,7].

2 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the theological meanings embedded in Manggarai traditional marriage rituals in Wae Rii Village, Manggarai Regency. A qualitative ethnographic design was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of ritual practices, symbols, and lived religious meanings within their natural social and cultural context [5,6]. Informants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure intergenerational data triangulation, involving six key participants: two traditional elders (*tu'a adat*), one representative of Catholic religious leadership, one Catholic married couple, and one representative of young adults. This sampling strategy allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives on the transmission and interpretation of ritual meanings across generations [5].

Fieldwork included direct observation of key stages of marriage rituals, such as pre-marital negotiations, ritual prayers, and communal affirmations of marital unity. The researcher assumed a moderate participant-observer role, allowing engagement with ritual practices while maintaining analytical reflexivity, which is essential in ethnographic theological research [6]. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and

systematic field notes, while the data collection process was conducted for three months (Januari-March, 2025). The collected data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurring symbols, ritual expressions, and moral narratives emerging from the field data [8].

The thematic analysis followed the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke, including familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, and interpretation [8]. The resulting themes were subsequently interpreted through a contextual theological framework, synthesizing ethnographic findings with Catholic doctrines of marriage, covenant, and sacramentality [6,7]. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from all participants, respecting the sacred nature of marriage rituals, and ensuring confidentiality and privacy throughout the research process.

3 Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the main findings of the study, focusing on the theological meaning of Manggarai traditional marriage rituals in Wae Rii Village, their socio-cultural implications, and the contemporary challenges that threaten their transformative moral power. Rather than merely asserting a parallelism between customary practices and Catholic doctrine, this discussion engages in a theological dialogue that critically examines how local rituals both enrich and challenge Christian understandings of marriage [1,2].

3.1 Theological Meaning of Manggarai Traditional Marriage Rituals

The findings demonstrate that Manggarai traditional marriage rituals embody core theological principles that resonate deeply with the Catholic sacrament of marriage, particularly unity (*unitas*) and indissolubility (*indissolubilitas*), which stand at the heart of Catholic matrimonial theology. Informants consistently emphasized that marriage in Manggarai culture is not understood as a mere social contract or private agreement, but as a sacred covenant that binds the couple for life before God, ancestors, and the community [6]. One informant articulated this conviction clearly: *“The traditional marriage ritual strengthens church marriage because it emphasizes that marriage cannot be separated. What is united in custom must remain united forever.”*

This testimony reflects a covenantal understanding of marriage that carries moral, spiritual, and communal consequences. Marriage is perceived as a lifelong commitment sustained not only by personal affection but also by shared responsibility within a network of kinship and tradition. Such an understanding corresponds closely with Catholic theology, which views marriage as a sacramental participation in God’s faithful and enduring covenantal love [6].

This covenantal vision is articulated most explicitly through ritual prayers, symbolic expressions, and communal participation that function as theological language within the local cultural framework [6,7]. Rather than serving as cultural embellishments, these ritual elements communicate theological meanings that shape moral imagination and marital responsibility. In this sense, Manggarai marriage rituals exemplify what inculturation theology describes as the embodiment of Christian faith within culturally specific forms, enabling doctrine to be experienced as lived reality rather than abstract teaching [5].

Contemporary theological scholarship increasingly recognizes that inculturation is not a peripheral concern but a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission. Widyawati et al. emphasize that the preservation of local language and culture within the Indonesian Church is essential for sustaining evangelization, particularly in sacramental and liturgical contexts [9]. From this perspective, Manggarai marriage rituals can be understood as a concrete expression of the Church's inculturative mission, where faith is articulated through indigenous symbols without diminishing its sacramental depth.

a. Renge Ela Nempung and the Dual Spiritual Dimension

A central theological element of the Manggarai marriage ritual is the prayer *renge ela nempung*. This prayer invokes blessings not only from God but also from the ancestors, reflecting a dual spiritual orientation: (1) a vertical relationship with God as the ultimate source of life and blessing, and (2) a horizontal relationship with ancestors and the community as moral witnesses and guardians of marital fidelity.

From a contextual theological perspective, this dual orientation does not contradict Christian faith but resonates with the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, where the living and the dead remain united within a sacred spiritual fellowship [7,5]. Ancestors are not worshipped as divine beings but revered as moral mediators whose lives exemplify fidelity, responsibility, and continuity of tradition. This understanding aligns with broader African and Asian theological reflections that interpret ancestral consciousness as a culturally mediated expression of communal memory and ethical accountability rather than idolatry.

Comparative insights from African Catholic theology further illuminate this dynamic. The synodal reimagining of Nigerian Catholic marriage rites demonstrates how ancestral symbols and communal memory can enrich sacramental theology when critically integrated within ecclesial discernment [11]. Similarly, *renge ela nempung* functions as an inculturated theological expression that affirms Christian covenant theology while grounding it in local cosmology and social ethics.

In this sense, *renge ela nempung* represents a form of liturgical inculturation, where theological meanings are communicated through culturally intelligible symbols and prayers [10]. The prayer does not replace Christian prayer but mediates it through indigenous

language, rhythm, and symbolic imagination. As theoretical discussions on inculturation for transformative evangelization emphasize, authentic inculturation occurs when local symbols are not merely tolerated but become vehicles of theological meaning capable of shaping moral life and communal responsibility [12].

Anthropological and empirical approaches to inculturation further stress that ritual practices must be understood as lived realities that influence moral behavior and social relationships [13]. In Manggarai society, the invocation of ancestors during marriage rituals reinforces the conviction that marriage is accountable not only before God but also before the moral memory of the community, thereby strengthening communal responsibility and ethical commitment.

b. Acer Nao Wase Wunut and the Theology of Indissolubility

Another powerful symbolic expression within the Manggarai marriage ritual is *acer nao wase wunut*, meaning “one in life and one in death.” This expression affirms marital permanence and encapsulates the Manggarai understanding of marriage as an irrevocable covenant rather than a reversible personal choice. It conveys a vision of marriage that integrates emotional commitment, moral responsibility, and spiritual endurance.

Theologically, this aligns closely with Catholic moral and sacramental theology, which understands marriage as a sacramental sign of God’s faithful and enduring love [6]. Within the Manggarai context, this belief is not articulated through doctrinal formulas but is concretized through ritual speech acts that publicly bind the couple before God, ancestors, and the community.

This public and communal dimension of marital commitment resonates with Afro-theological perspectives that view marriage rituals as communal acts of moral formation, where the community assumes responsibility for sustaining marital fidelity [11]. Similarly, in Manggarai society, *acer nao wase wunut* operates as a performative declaration that embeds ethical obligations—fidelity, mutual respect, and perseverance—within the ritual itself.

Thus, Manggarai traditional marriage rituals can be read as a form of contextual moral theology, where ethical norms are internalized through symbolic participation and communal accountability rather than imposed externally [6,7]. This challenges modern individualistic conceptions of marriage by affirming that marital commitment is sustained through relational networks, shared moral narratives, and collective responsibility.

3.2 Socio-Cultural Values and Communal Responsibility

Beyond its theological dimension, the Manggarai traditional marriage ritual functions as a vital social institution that reinforces communal responsibility and collective identity. In

Manggarai society, marriage is not understood as a private contract between two individuals but as a communal event that unites two extended families (*woe nehu*), thereby establishing long-term social, moral, and relational obligations. Informants consistently emphasized this communal understanding, as reflected in the statement: “*Marriage unites not only the couple but the two big families, and this bond should last forever.*” This perspective situates marriage within a broader social framework where individual commitment is inseparable from communal accountability.

From a sociological perspective, the Manggarai marriage ritual operates as an integrative mechanism that strengthens social cohesion and sustains social order. Émile Durkheim’s theory of ritual provides a useful analytical lens for understanding this function. Durkheim argues that rituals renew collective consciousness and reinforce social solidarity by reasserting shared values and moral norms through symbolic action [14]. In the Manggarai context, this function is clearly visible in communal meals, ritual negotiations, public exchanges of symbolic goods, and collective participation by kinship groups before, during, and after the marriage ceremony. These ritual practices transform marriage into a social fact that binds individuals into a moral community.

Ritual actions do not merely accompany marriage; they actively constitute marriage as a socially binding reality. Through ritual dialogue, symbolic gestures, and public acknowledgment, the community legitimizes the marital union and embeds it within collective moral expectations. In this sense, the marriage ritual becomes a performative act that renews not only marital bonds but also the moral fabric of the community itself.

Recent empirical studies on Indonesian ritual practices support this interpretation. Niman’s study on the intersection of belief, culture, and social life demonstrates that rituals function as critical spaces where religious meaning, ethnic identity, and social norms converge, shaping patterns of behavior and communal expectations [15]. Manggarai marriage rituals exemplify this intersection, as they simultaneously articulate cultural identity, regulate social relationships, and reinforce shared moral values.

Anthropologically, Manggarai marriage rituals also generate social capital, understood as networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual obligation embedded within social relationships [16]. By uniting two extended families, marriage expands kinship networks and redistributes social responsibilities across generations. Married couples are not left to navigate marital challenges in isolation but are embedded within dense kinship structures that provide moral guidance, mediation, and informal social control. Elders and relatives play an active role in advising, correcting, and intervening when marital tensions arise. Ideally, this communal involvement serves as a protective buffer against marital breakdown and social fragmentation.

Comparative studies on ritual and ethnic identity further illuminate this function. Research on liturgical rituals in Jewish synagogues shows that ritual practices play a crucial role in

constructing ethnic identity and reinforcing communal boundaries, especially in contexts of social and cultural change [17]. Similarly, Manggarai marriage rituals reinforce ethnic identity by embedding marriage within ancestral customs, ritual language, and communal memory. Through repeated participation in these rituals, individuals internalize a sense of belonging and moral responsibility toward both family and community.

Beyond social cohesion, Manggarai marriage rituals contribute significantly to the formation of moral life. Philosophical reflections on ritual emphasize that rituals are not merely symbolic representations of moral values but active processes that shape moral dispositions and ethical sensibilities [18]. Through embodied participation in ritual practices, individuals learn what is expected of them—not through abstract instruction, but through lived experience and communal affirmation. In the Manggarai context, marriage rituals communicate moral expectations such as fidelity, perseverance, mutual respect, and responsibility toward extended family networks.

However, the effectiveness of this social and moral mechanism depends not merely on ritual participation but on the internalization of its values. Several informants observed that while ritual performance remains relatively strong, its deeper meanings are increasingly at risk of erosion, particularly among younger generations. When rituals are performed primarily as social obligations or cultural formalities, their capacity to shape moral behavior diminishes. This condition reflects a broader pattern of ritual formalism, where symbols persist but lose their ethical and formative power [15].

From a contextual theological perspective, this challenge underscores the need to integrate ritual practice with moral and spiritual formation. Models of contextual theology emphasize that cultural rituals must be continuously interpreted and re-appropriated within changing social contexts to remain meaningful [6,7]. Inculturation, therefore, is not a static preservation of tradition but a dynamic process of dialogue between faith, culture, and lived experience. Without such reflective engagement, rituals risk becoming symbolic shells detached from moral life.

In this framework, Manggarai marriage rituals should be understood as pedagogical spaces for moral formation. Ritual participation must be accompanied by intentional catechesis, intergenerational dialogue, and communal reflection that help individuals grasp the ethical significance of the symbols they enact. As philosophical and sociological studies on ritual and morality suggest, rituals retain their social and ethical effectiveness only when communities actively engage in meaning-making processes that connect symbolic action with lived responsibility [18].

Overall, the socio-cultural values embedded in Manggarai marriage rituals offer a compelling alternative to increasingly individualistic conceptions of marriage. By affirming marriage as a communal and moral institution sustained by collective responsibility, these rituals contribute

to social cohesion, moral formation, and the resilience of communal life in the face of rapid social change.

3.3 The Paradox of Sacred Values and Social Reality

One of the most critical findings of this study is the paradox between the profound theological ideals embedded in Manggarai traditional marriage rituals and the contemporary social reality marked by increasing domestic violence and marital dissolution. While the rituals strongly emphasize unity, harmony, and indissolubility, these sacred values are not consistently embodied in everyday marital life. Informants repeatedly observed that many young couples participate in traditional marriage rituals primarily as cultural obligations rather than as deeply internalized moral and spiritual commitments. As one informant stated candidly, *“We follow the traditional rituals because it is required, but honestly, we do not really understand the meaning.”*

This gap between ritual ideals and lived reality highlights a fundamental tension between tradition and modern social experience. Rituals that once functioned as powerful mechanisms of moral formation now risk becoming symbolic performances detached from ethical practice. This phenomenon reflects what may be described as ritual formalism, in which rituals are maintained outwardly while their transformative moral power is gradually eroded.

Sutam describes this process as ritual reduction, where ritual symbols lose their ethical and pedagogical force under the pressures of modernization, secularization, and shifting social values [19]. In such contexts, rituals continue to be performed due to social expectations, cultural identity, or fear of communal sanctions, rather than because they shape moral consciousness. Similar patterns are observed in broader Indonesian ritual contexts, where ritual continuity persists despite diminishing interpretive depth, particularly among younger generations [15].

From the perspective of ritual theory, this erosion of moral efficacy is deeply problematic. Scholars of ritual and moral life emphasize that rituals do not automatically form virtue; rather, they require sustained processes of interpretation, communal reflection, and moral reinforcement to remain ethically effective [18]. When these processes weaken, ritual action alone becomes insufficient to guide ethical behavior or sustain moral commitments.

The paradox between sacred values and social reality can also be examined through postmodern theories of intimacy and relational risk. Bulcroft and colleagues argue that contemporary romantic relationships are increasingly shaped by uncertainty, emotional vulnerability, and an emphasis on individual self-fulfillment [20]. In such contexts, marriage is no longer perceived primarily as an irrevocable moral covenant but as a negotiable

relationship subject to ongoing evaluation. This shift fundamentally challenges traditional understandings of marital indissolubility.

In the Manggarai context, ritual affirmations of lifelong unity coexist with social conditions that normalize separation as a response to conflict. While the ritual proclaims permanence, lived marital experience is shaped by economic pressures, changing gender roles, media narratives, and evolving expectations of emotional satisfaction. This tension weakens the capacity of ritual symbols to function as stable moral anchors in everyday life.

A particularly troubling dimension of this paradox is the persistence of domestic violence despite the ritual's strong emphasis on harmony, mutual responsibility, and communal accountability. Recent sociological research in Indonesia demonstrates that unresolved power imbalances, weak communication patterns, and limited relational resilience significantly contribute to family breakdown, even within culturally ritualized marriages [21]. These findings suggest that ritual participation alone cannot function as an effective safeguard against marital violence.

From a theological perspective, this situation raises a critical critique: ritual does not automatically form virtue. Stephen B. Bevans emphasizes that contextual rituals require continuous theological interpretation so that symbols remain ethically formative within changing social realities [6]. Without catechetical explanation and moral reflection, rituals risk becoming empty symbols detached from lived Christian discipleship.

Moreover, certain patriarchal interpretations embedded within customary practices may unintentionally legitimize power asymmetries within marriage. Without critical theological discernment, such interpretations can normalize domination rather than mutuality, contradicting the very theological ideals of unity and covenantal love that the ritual seeks to uphold [7]. Contextual theology therefore calls not only for preservation of ritual forms but also for critical engagement with their social implications.

This condition illustrates Ogburn's concept of cultural lag, in which symbolic and moral systems fail to adapt at the same pace as social change, resulting in a rupture between tradition and lived experience [22]. In Manggarai society, marriage rituals continue to articulate enduring theological ideals, while everyday marital life is increasingly shaped by rapid social transformation.

Philosophical reflections on ritual and moral life underscore that rituals sustain ethical traditions only when accompanied by narrative interpretation, communal accountability, and intentional moral formation [18]. Without these supporting structures, rituals risk becoming symbolic remnants rather than living practices capable of shaping moral behavior. The paradox observed in Manggarai marriage rituals thus reveals not the failure of tradition itself,

but the urgent need for renewed theological interpretation and pastoral engagement that reconnect ritual symbols with lived moral responsibility.

3.4 Intergenerational Gaps and Cultural Discontinuity

This study identifies a pronounced intergenerational gap in the interpretation and appropriation of Manggarai traditional marriage rituals. Older generations consistently understand these rituals as sacred expressions of faith, moral order, and communal identity, rooted in ancestral tradition and integrated with Catholic belief. For them, ritual participation carries ethical weight and spiritual responsibility, shaping lifelong marital commitment. In contrast, many younger participants increasingly perceive marriage rituals as costly and time-consuming formalities, performed primarily to meet social expectations rather than as meaningful theological practices. As one informant noted, “Tradition still exists, but its meaning is slowly disappearing among young people.”

This divergence reflects a deeper process of cultural discontinuity, in which ritual forms persist while their symbolic, moral, and theological meanings weaken across generations. Such discontinuity threatens the sustainability of Manggarai marriage rituals not only as cultural heritage but as living theological resources capable of shaping Christian marital life. When rituals are repeated without meaningful transmission of values, they risk becoming symbolic shells—externally performed yet internally emptied of ethical and spiritual substance.

From the perspective of contextual theology, this condition signals a failure of theological interiorization. Bevans emphasizes that contextual theology is not the passive inheritance of forms but an ongoing interpretive process in which faith is continually articulated within concrete cultural experience [6]. When ritual continuity is not accompanied by catechetical narration and theological reflection, especially for younger generations shaped by rapid social change, the mediating power of ritual diminishes. Martasudjita similarly argues that inculturation requires critical engagement with cultural symbols so that they remain vehicles of faith rather than static traditions [7].

This insight resonates with Omollo’s theoretical discussion of inculturation for transformative evangelization. Drawing on African Catholic theological heritage and grassroots experience, Omollo contends that inculturation fails when it remains at the level of external adaptation rather than fostering deep symbolic transformation within the believing community [12]. Rituals become transformative only when communities actively interpret their symbols in relation to lived realities. Applied to the Manggarai context, this suggests that the persistence of ritual performance alone is insufficient; what is required is an intentional pedagogical process that enables younger generations to appropriate ritual meanings as resources for moral discernment and marital commitment.

Broader socio-cultural transformations further intensify this generational gap. Niman's recent study on Indonesian ritual practices highlights how modernization, education, media exposure, and economic pressures reshape how younger generations relate to ritual obligations [15]. While elders associate rituals with collective identity and moral accountability, younger participants often approach them pragmatically, evaluating their relevance in terms of cost, efficiency, and personal benefit. This shift does not necessarily indicate rejection of tradition, but rather a reconfiguration of meaning-making within changing social contexts.

Traditionally, Manggarai marriage rituals functioned as mechanisms of moral socialization, embedding couples within dense networks of kinship responsibility and communal oversight. However, when younger couples participate without understanding the theological and ethical dimensions of these rituals, their formative function weakens. The result is a growing gap between ritual performance and moral practice, contributing to the broader paradox between sacred ritual values and contemporary marital realities.

Insights from mission and inculturation studies in the Indonesian Church further clarify this challenge. Widyawati, Lon, and Midun stress that effective inculturation involves preserving not only ritual forms but also local language, narrative, and symbolic imagination [9]. When rituals are detached from their linguistic and narrative foundations, their capacity to communicate faith erodes. In the Manggarai context, reduced familiarity with ritual language among younger generations limits their ability to grasp the theological depth embedded in customary marriage practices.

Comparative perspectives from African theology offer constructive pathways forward. Aina's synodal approach to reimagining Nigerian Catholic marriage rites emphasizes inclusive dialogue involving elders, clergy, theologians, and young couples [11]. Such a synodal process allows rituals to remain faithful to tradition while being reinterpreted in light of contemporary realities. Applied to Manggarai society, this approach suggests that bridging intergenerational gaps requires communal discernment rather than mere preservation of form.

Ultimately, the intergenerational gap identified in this study reflects a broader crisis of cultural and theological transmission under conditions of social change. While ritual forms endure, their moral and theological meanings risk erosion without intentional efforts to foster interpretation, dialogue, and catechesis. Integrating insights from contextual theology, inculturation theory, Indonesian ritual studies, and synodal pastoral models, this study argues that revitalizing Manggarai marriage rituals requires moving beyond ritual maintenance toward participatory reinterpretation. Only through such processes can these rituals continue to function as living theological resources that shape marital integrity, communal responsibility, and Christian discipleship in contemporary Manggarai society.

3.5 Pastoral and Theological Implications: Toward Liturgical Inculturation

In response to the theological and socio-cultural challenges identified in this study—namely ritual formalism, intergenerational gaps, and the weakening of moral internalization—there is an urgent need for pastoral and theological interventions that move beyond the mere preservation of ritual forms toward the revitalization of meaning. Within the framework of contextual theology, such interventions must enable Manggarai traditional marriage rituals to function as living theological resources that shape moral consciousness, communal responsibility, and Christian marital commitment.

Central to this effort is the principle of liturgical inculturation, understood not as the superficial insertion of cultural elements into Christian worship, but as a dynamic and dialogical process in which faith and culture mutually interpret and transform one another. Shorter emphasizes that inculturation is a continuous process whereby the Gospel becomes embedded in local cultures while simultaneously purifying and renewing them [10]. Similarly, Doyle underscores that inculturation in Roman Catholicism is fundamentally theological, aiming to express the Gospel authentically within particular cultural contexts without compromising ecclesial communion [23]. Applied to Manggarai society, this implies that traditional marriage rituals should not be treated merely as parallel customs accompanying the sacrament of marriage, but as culturally embodied theological expressions that can enrich the Church's understanding of covenant, fidelity, and communal responsibility.

A first pastoral implication concerns intergenerational education and theological interiorization. The findings show that many younger couples participate in customary rituals without adequate understanding of their symbolic and moral significance. This reflects what Omollo describes as a failure of inculturation at the level of interiorization, where rituals are transmitted externally but lack transformative depth [12]. To address this, marriage catechesis should intentionally integrate Manggarai ritual symbols, narratives, and language with Catholic moral teaching on marriage. For example, explaining the meaning of *acer nao wase wunut* (“one in life and one in death”) alongside the Church's doctrine of marital indissolubility can help couples recognize the deep convergence between cultural wisdom and sacramental theology [6,7].

Language plays a crucial role in this process. Widyawati, Lon, and Midun argue that preserving local language and symbolic imagination is essential for effective mission and inculturation in the Indonesian Church [9]. When rituals are conducted in forms no longer understood by younger generations, their catechetical and ethical power diminishes. Pastoral formation therefore requires contextual translation—both linguistic and theological—so that ritual symbols remain intelligible and morally formative.

A second implication involves the integration of Manggarai symbols within marriage catechesis and liturgical celebration. Authentic liturgical inculturation does not alter the

essential structure of the sacrament but enriches its celebration through culturally resonant expressions. Doyle stresses that inculturation respects the integrity of the liturgy while allowing local cultures to shape its expression [23]. In this light, Manggarai ritual prayers, communal affirmations, and symbolic language can be incorporated into preparatory rites, homilies, or catechetical explanations surrounding the sacrament of marriage. Such integration allows couples to experience the sacrament not as a foreign imposition but as the fulfillment of values already embedded within their cultural tradition.

Comparative insights from African theology reinforce this approach. Aina's synodal reimagining of Nigerian Catholic marriage rites demonstrates how local symbols and communal participation can be meaningfully integrated into sacramental practice without undermining theological integrity [11]. Aina emphasizes the importance of synodal processes involving clergy, theologians, elders, and married couples in discerning how rituals can respond to contemporary pastoral challenges. This model offers a valuable paradigm for the Manggarai Church, suggesting that liturgical inculturation should emerge from communal discernment rather than unilateral decision-making.

A third implication concerns critical theological discernment and collaboration. While Manggarai marriage rituals embody profound theological values, this study also indicates that certain customary interpretations may unintentionally reinforce patriarchal power relations. Contextual theology insists that culture must neither be absolutized nor dismissed, but engaged critically through dialogue with the Gospel [6]. Bevans highlights that contextual theology requires ongoing interaction between faith and culture to affirm what is life-giving and transform what contradicts Christian anthropology [6].

Omollo further emphasizes that inculturation must remain open to prophetic critique if it is to contribute to transformative evangelization [12]. In the Manggarai context, collaboration between traditional leaders, clergy, and theologians is essential to distinguish core symbolic values—such as fidelity and communal responsibility—from culturally conditioned practices that may require reinterpretation.

In sum, revitalizing Manggarai traditional marriage rituals requires moving beyond ritual maintenance toward living contextual theology. Through intergenerational catechesis, liturgical inculturation, synodal collaboration, and critical theological reflection, these rituals can continue to mediate the Gospel meaningfully. As Martasudjita affirms, inculturation becomes authentic when faith is lived and experienced within concrete cultural realities [7]. In this way, Manggarai marriage rituals can remain vital theological resources that nurture marital integrity, communal accountability, and Christian discipleship within a changing social landscape.

4 Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Manggarai traditional marriage rituals constitute more than cultural heritage or customary obligations; they function as contextual theological expressions that mediate Christian covenantal values through indigenous symbols, ritual language, and communal practices. Core theological principles such as unity (*unitas*), fidelity, and indissolubility (*indissolubilitas*) are deeply embedded in ritual elements like *renge ela nempung* and *acer nao wase wunut*, which articulate marriage as a sacred and lifelong covenant witnessed by God, ancestors, and the community.

However, the findings also reveal a critical paradox between the enduring theological ideals articulated in these rituals and the contemporary social reality marked by increasing marital conflict, domestic violence, and weakening commitment, particularly among younger couples. This paradox is not primarily the result of a doctrinal contradiction between custom and Catholic teaching, but rather reflects processes of ritual formalism, intergenerational discontinuity, and insufficient theological interiorization. Ritual continuity persists, yet its moral and formative power is increasingly eroded when symbols are performed without sustained catechetical interpretation and ethical formation.

By engaging Manggarai marriage rituals through the lens of contextual theology and inculturation, this study contributes to a deeper theological understanding of how local cultural practices can function as living loci of theological meaning. At the same time, it underscores that inculturation is not a static achievement but an ongoing process requiring critical dialogue between faith and culture. Without such dialogue, rituals risk either being absolutized as untouchable traditions or reduced to mere cultural performances detached from Gospel values.

The study further highlights the importance of intergenerational transmission and communal participation in sustaining the theological vitality of marriage rituals. Bridging generational gaps requires intentional pastoral strategies that integrate traditional symbols with Catholic moral teaching, preserve local ritual language, and foster shared theological reflection among elders, clergy, and young couples. In this regard, synodal and collaborative approaches offer promising pathways for reimagining marriage catechesis and liturgical practice without compromising theological integrity.

Ultimately, this research affirms that Manggarai traditional marriage rituals can continue to serve as transformative theological resources when they are critically interpreted, pastorally integrated, and ethically embodied. Through liturgical inculturation and contextual theological reflection, these rituals may not only preserve cultural identity but also strengthen marital integrity, communal responsibility, and the lived proclamation of Christ's covenantal love within contemporary Manggarai society.

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