Not Forbidden but a Fellowship “Food”: A Theological Discourse on the Dynamic Encounter between Christian and Marapu Religion in Sumba, Indonesia

Irene Umbu LOLO
Theological Seminary of The Christian Church of Sumba, Indonesia

Abstract
This article highlights a dynamic encounter between Christians and the local religion in Sumba, Indonesia. The encounter raises the question of identity among Christians. Identity as a Sumbanese on the one hand and as a Christian on the other collides when dealing with the tradition of eating together. Before the arrival of Christianity, the tradition of sharing meat and eating together among the Sumbanese in a traditional ceremony was a form of fellowship. Animal meat that has been used as a ritual medium for ancestral spirits is then distributed to the family members. The meat was cooked and eaten together to strengthen the brotherhood/sisterhood among them. After the church’s arrival, Christians had to stay away from tribal religious traditions. With thorough investigations of cultural texts and exegesis from the biblical source of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1, I argue that eating together between Christians and their tribal relatives is a theological act reflecting a Christ-imitating attitude of faith.

Keywords
food-offering, idolatry, identity, Marapu, fellowship, Sumba

INTRODUCTION
Eating and drinking in family settings is important in the Sumbanese culture. Refusing food and drink can be considered as insulting and disrespectful.¹ Spiritually, food and drink are understood as God’s gifts.

¹ Nggodu Tunggul, Etika dan Moralitas dalam Budaya Sumba (Jakarta: Pro Millenio Center, 2004), 146-147.
Therefore food and drink must be received with gratitude and respect, not to be ignored, thrown away, or wasted. What is served must be eaten until it is all consumed.²

The Sumba Christian Church (GKS), as one of the Protestant churches in Indonesia, forbids its members to eat the meat offered to the ancestral spirits in the ritual of Marapu, the original religion of the Sumba people.³ On the one hand, this prohibition aims to starkly distinguish Christian identity from the Marapus. On the other hand, however, it could potentially rupture the kinship between Christians and their brothers and sisters who follow tribal religions.⁴ Giving and receiving meat in the context of Sumbanese culture is a sign of fellowship. Therefore, refraining from giving meat or refusing meat as a gift during a meal gathering is an act that indirectly denies and breaks kinship.

The GKS ban raises identity issues for its members. This problem often leads the people to a dilemma. At a certain point GKS members display a dual identity, namely, presenting themselves as Christians who devotedly worship in the church, but during traditional ceremonies, they position themselves as an inseparable part of the kinship alliance that is still heavily influenced by the Marapu tradition. They even practice the Marapu ritual and eat the meat-offering.

Through this article, I seek to show that it is important to revisit the GKS prohibition and find alternative constructive approaches that can resolve the issue of the identity of GKS members. By exploring cultural

³ Marapu is a belief in the supreme god or gods, ancestral spirits, spirits and supernatural powers. Sumbanese people who do not follow the official religion in Indonesia identify themselves as Marapu people. F.D. Wellem, *Injil dan Marapu* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia 2004), 41-42. The sociocultural life of the Sumbanese cannot be separated from the Marapu belief as the original religion of ancestral heritage. The conversion to Christianity and Islam has changed Marapu from a traditional religion to a custom. Sylvia Asih Anggraeeni, ed., *East Sumba: A Hidden Treasure in the Archipelago* (Waingapu: Pemerintah Kabupaten Sumba Timur 2005), 51.
⁴ I experienced this as a child when my aunt invited me to attend a traditional party at the house of her brother who was a Marapu believer. At the time of the meal together, my aunt as a Christian only accepted rice and chili sauce while she rejected the meat. We also took a sitting position slightly apart from our family members who were enjoying the meat dish. After the party was over, we said goodbye without taking meat home.
texts and exegesis of the biblical text of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 I argue that eating together between Christians and their tribal relatives is a theological act reflecting a Christ-imitating attitude of faith.

I begin by explaining the meat-sharing during a traditional meal gathering in the Sumbanese socio-religious context and the forbidden food in the context of GKS to show that there are different views regarding the practice of meat offerings. The theological choices of missionaries from the Nederlands Zendings Genootschap will be explored because they have contributed to the decision of the GKS synod in this regard. Likewise, Calvin’s teachings regarding the division of human groups, predestination, the fate of nonbelievers, and the spirit of pietism were also inherited by GKS as a Calvinist church in Sumba.

The biblical text in 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1, which is related to the topic under discussion, will be used as a reference source to obtain important insights to understand the background of the prohibition of eating meat offerings in the context of GKS. Finally, I conclude with some recommendations of alternative ideas that hopefully can contribute to the reconstruction effort against the GKS ban in order to answer the question of the identity among GKS members.

**Fellowship Food in the Context of the Sumbanese Society**

Various traditional ceremonies and rituals held by the people of Sumba are always marked by the act of slaughtering animals. The animals that are slaughtered are usually horses, buffalos, pigs, and chickens. Certain animals are even indicated to be present in the socio-religious activities of the Sumbanese. This is evident in the expression *ura manu-eti wei*, which means chicken tendon and pork liver. This expression conveys the important function of these two types of animals at traditional parties and ritual events both inside and outside the house.\(^5\)

The slaughtered animals must be the best and healthy ones, specially prepared for traditional ceremonies and rituals. According to Kapita, in earlier times the Sumbanese people were required to work hard in

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agriculture and animal husbandry. This was intended not only to meet daily needs but also to fulfill traditional and ritual needs. The best agricultural and livestock products should be devoted to traditional ceremonies and rituals.\(^6\)

For Marapu adherents, a certain part (usually the liver or umbilical cord) of the slaughtered animal will be offered to Marapu.\(^7\) The *Rato* (priest) also uses the liver or intestines of the animal as a medium to find out the instructions and will of Marapu and predict the future of the family or *kabisu* (clan) who organizes traditional ceremonies and rituals. The people of Marapu believe that the instructions and will of Marapu can be read and understood by a *Rato* through the medium of the liver or intestines of the slaughtered animal.\(^8\)

After the ritual ceremony, the meat of the animal will usually be distributed to all family members and guests who are present, including non-Marapu believers.\(^9\) There is a part of cooked meat to be eaten together; there is also a portion of raw meat that is distributed to take home. Even

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7 In this article, the word “Marapu” is used in two senses. On the one hand it refers to ancestral spirits, but on the other hand it refers to the original belief system of the Sumbanese people. The Marapu belief has existed since the time of the Sumbanese ancestors and is firmly held to this day. It underlies all aspects of Sumbanese life, including sociocultural aspects. The Marapu ritual ceremony marks various activities inside and outside the village, such as building houses and activities in the fields. Wellem, *Injil*, 41, 49-54. The Marapu ritual begins with the slaughter of certain animals such as chickens, pigs, horses, and buffaloes. The ceremony ends with the sharing of meat and eating together.

8 Marapu in Sumbanese thought is an intermediary between humans and God. God is understood by the Sumbanese as the Creator and Maker (*Mawulu-Majii*). God is described as a woman and a man, namely, *Ina Pakawurungu-Ama Pakawurungu*, which means Mother and Father as a whole. *Ina Mbulu-Ama Ndaba* means Mother and Father of the universe. *Hupu Ina-Hupu Ama* means Most High Mother and Father. Humans cannot communicate with the Divine without the intercession of Marapu. (Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba*, 93; Anggraeni, *East Sumba*, 52, 58). The desires and hopes of humans expressed through prayer are conveyed by Marapu to God. On the other hand, the answer and will of the Divine are expressed by Marapu to humans through the media of the heart or the umbilical cord of the sacrificial animal. (Kapita, *Masyarakat Sumba*, 37, 86-87).

if there is a family member who does not have time to attend, their share will be delivered to their house.

In Sumbanese culture, especially regarding banquets according to traditional procedures, the attitude of ignoring or forgetting relatives, including not giving and not receiving meat, is considered a disrespectful attitude that damages family relationships. Such an attitude is seen as violating customary law and can therefore be subject to a fine. Customary fines are paid through giving gold or silver jewelry, weaving, or slaughtered animals as a sign of apology to relatives who have been neglected.10

Meat-sharing in the Sumbanese socio-religious context conveys a positive purpose. The shared meat is a symbol of togetherness, brotherhood, and fellowship. Here, the act of giving and receiving meat as a symbol of togetherness, brotherhood, and fellowship is an important part of Sumbanese culture.

**FORBIDDEN FOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SUMBA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

For a long time, GKS forbade its members to attend the Marapu ritual and eat the meat offered to Marapu. The Marapu ritual is believed to be against the teachings of the Christian faith. Taking part in the ritual is considered sinful. In several synods, GKS continued to struggle with issues that arose because of its congregants’ participation in the Marapu ritual. At the Ninth Synod Session in Wanukaka (West Sumba) in 1952, the GKS made a decision to assign local church councils to prevent participation of GKS members in the Marapu worship as much as possible. The formulation of the decision is as follows:

If it is indeed dangerous to be present, because the members of the congregation consider it to be part of the Marapu service, the local Church Council may try: a. To prevent its members from attending. b. To make an effort to eradicate the customs in the nation’s society that are now jeopardizing the development of the Church of God in this world.11

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10 Tunggul, *Etika*, 143.
In addition to preventing participation of GKS members, the church assembly had tried to eradicate the Marapu ritual practice, which strongly influenced GKS members and potentially hindered the development of churches on the island of Sumba. The decision of this synod is still valid and is guiding GKS members to this day. Theologically, GKS believes that the Marapu ritual can affect the loyalty of church members as followers of Christ. Everything related to the Marapu ritual is considered as idolatry, which Christians should avoid.12

Thus, included in the GKS forbidden food are animals sacrificed to Marapu. There are only certain parts of the animal that are taken and used for religious purposes. However, the church prohibits Christians to consume the rest of the meat because it is considered impure. Here, the Christians have to come forward with their religious restrictions, which differ from those of the Marapu people in Sumba. If a GKS member continues to attend the Marapu ritual and eat the meat offered to Marapu, then the person concerned will receive a warning from the church board. In the past, many members of the GKS were even subject to church discipline, such as not being allowed to receive Holy Communion and being excommunicated from the fellowship for not heeding this prohibition.13

This issue has become a challenge for GKS because there are still many members who disobey either openly or secretly. Marapu's influence on GKS members was so immense that they disobeyed the church's prohibition. This challenge was also recognized by GKS. In the GBKU (general policy outline) of GKS 2010-2014 it was stated that GKS realized that it was not easy to separate the Sumba culture and Marapu beliefs from the congregations, and that it is important for the church to take transformational steps forward regarding this matter. It was also stated that GKS needed adequate knowledge of cultural anthropology to carry out evangelism, shepherd members of the congregation, and teach the Christian faith in the Sumba context.14

Some researchers also describe real conditions that further clarify the challenges faced by GKS. Aritonang and Steenbrink state that Sumba is one

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12 Wellem, Injil, 390-391.
13 Wellem, Injil, 190.
of the few areas in Indonesia where the people still adhere to tribal religion. Sumbanese, including Christians, are strongly influenced by Marapu traditions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{15} Based on her research, Forshee states that many Christians in Sumba still practice the Marapu ritual. Even though they have become Christians, it turns out that they still adhere to old beliefs.\textsuperscript{16} Wellem’s research also shows that Christian Sumbanese have strong ties to their ancestral customs. Even though GKS has struggled to eliminate the influence of these old customs, GKS members still practice prohibited things such as polygamy and eating meat offered to Marapu.\textsuperscript{17} Rambe cites Turk as a study that shows the unresolved problems and tensions of identity as a Christian Sumbanese in dealing with the context and belief system of Marapu. It is not uncommon for GKS congregation members to carry out Marapu rituals such as using sacrificial animals or praying according to the Marapu tradition.\textsuperscript{18} Those who carry out this ritual almost certainly receive and eat the meat offered to Marapu. The researchers clearly describe the reality of the life of Christians today who are still tied to the ancestral religious system.

Sumbanese Christians still practice the Marapu ritual because this ancestral belief is closely related to their culture. Marapu beliefs affect all aspects of their lives. For them, there is no separation between Adat and Marapu belief—no separation between the sacred and the profane. For them, life is a totality.\textsuperscript{19} GKS needs to rethink its approach to this reality.

\textbf{THE THOUGHTS OF THE MISSIONARIES REGARDING MARAPU RITUAL}

The views of the missionary pastors who worked and served in Sumba seem to have had a strong influence on the attitudes and views of GKS. If it is seen from the formulation of the rules that have been described

17 Wellem, \textit{Injil}, 283.
above, then GKS aligns with the views of the missionaries who refused participation in food offered to Marapu.20

When Christianity was first introduced in Sumba, the missionaries judged the Sumbanese ritual as “worshiping the devil.”21 Pastor J. J. van Alphen, who worked in East Sumba, viewed the Sumbanese people as pitiful because their civilization was primitive and they were still in the dark. His colleague, Pastor Krijger, labeled the Marapu beliefs as false beliefs and regarded the Sumbanese as sinners for worshiping vain idols and believing in false gods.22 Pastor W. van Dijk who served in West Sumba, argued that eating the meat offered to Marapu was tantamount to sitting at the table of demons.23

GKS adopted the views of the missionary pastors who rejected the practice of Marapu religious rituals without presenting adequate theological reasons as a basis for decision-making and the establishment of church polity. This is mirrored in the absence of further explanation regarding the decisions and rules set by the GKS synod regarding the practice of the Marapu ritual. The absence of this theological explanation also contributed to the problem of the identity of the GKS members because they did not understand the basic biblical-theological reason for the ban.

The Marapu ritual events that were rejected by GKS included the Langu Paraingu (a ritual of inviting ancestral spirits to come to the village and eat with the villagers) and Pamangu Ndewa (the ritual of feeding the ancestral

20 However, it must also be stated that not all Zending pastors have a negative view. Pastor Willem Pos, for example, attended a traditional party organized by the kings of Sumba. He attends Marapu ceremonies and also eats at communal meals. For him, it is necessary from time to time for Christians to take part in the traditional events of the Marapu people in order to maintain good relations as long as they do not conflict with God’s word. (Wellem, Injil, 146.) Similar are the views of Pastor P. J. Lambooij and Pastor J. F. Colenbrander, who tend to be positive in interpreting eating meat offerings in the context of Sumba. These last two ministers expressed their theological views based on the text of 1 Corinthians 8:10. After exploring this text they reach a conclusion that differs from the views of their previous counterparts. See Th. van den End, Sumber-sumber Zending tentang Sejarah Gereja Kristen Sumba 1859-1972 (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia 1996), 451-454, 468-469.

21 Aritonang and Steenbrink, A History, 333.

22 Wellem, Injil, 136-137, 208-209.

23 End, Sumber, 450.
spirits). GKS compares the Marapu ritual to Holy Communion. Just as Holy Communion is attended only by believers in Jesus Christ, so should the Marapu ritual be attended only by people who believe in Marapu. GKS members who don’t believe in Marapu should not take part in the ritual.24

**Calvin’s Teachings and the Spirit of Pietism**

Based on the description above, it appears that GKS has a rather negative view of the practice of Marapu religion. In GKS’ view, Christians must not partake in Marapu rituals because it is considered idolatrous. The meat that has been impurely sacrificed in the Marapu ritual is deemed “unclean” and should not be touched or eaten by Christians. Eating ritual meat is a form of union with other gods. Such actions can be a stumbling block to other Christians. Therefore GKS members must avoid idolatry (1 Cor 10:14).

A Catholic theologian from Eastern Indonesia stated that the worship of ancestral spirits is an act that is not justified in the beliefs of the Protestant churches in general. This has something to do with the attitude of the Protestant churches that regard the cult of honoring the ancestors as a religious practice contrary to the Christian faith. The position of the Catholic Church is quite different. In Protestant theology, there is no place for the dead (ancestors) among the living community.25

Calvin’s teachings indirectly affect the ethical-theological attitude of GKS with regard to sacrificial meat. The GKS view that rejects meat offerings derives from the theological beliefs brought by the Dutch Calvinist Church and the missionary societies which are also heavily influenced by the Pietism of the nineteenth-century Protestant church.26

In his *Institutes*, Calvin distinguishes among four groups of human beings. The first group consists of the people who are immersed in idolatry because they are not equipped with the knowledge of God. The second group are people who have been told about the mystery of faith (sacraments), but because their lives are impure, they deny through their

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26 End, *Sumber*, xv.
actions the God they confess with their lips and are Christians in name only. The third group are people who are hypocrites who cover up the evil of their hearts by pretending. The fourth group are people who are born again by the Spirit of God and live a righteous life.  

The Marapu people seem to belong to the first group. They are people who have no knowledge of God and are immersed in idol worship. That is why the Dutch Mission Society sent its pastors with a view to evangelizing the Sumbanese so that they would have true knowledge of God and would no longer worship idols. The same evangelistic motivation still exists in GKS.

Calvin’s further teaching is that there is no trace of goodness in the first group of people. Even if they are doing something good, the background and motivation of their good actions need to be carefully observed. In agreement with Augustine, Calvin also asserted that even though the first group of people did good, they did not deserve a reward. They even had to be punished because their hearts were still polluted and their intentions were still evil and stained with sin. That is why GKS members think that Marapu people do not inherit salvation if they have not been baptized and become Christians. Although the GKS members do not force the Marapu people to be baptized, the purpose of evangelism can be considered “successful” only if the Marapu people accept Christ and are baptized.

Furthermore, in line with Calvin’s thinking and his teachings on predestination and the fate of unbelievers, the Marapu are categorized as people who were created and predestined for eternal punishment. They will suffer a terrible fate; they will experience eternal punishment and torment. They suffer the misfortune of being completely alienated from God. The reason for citing Calvin is that his teachings are still used by GKS pastors in sermons when evangelistic activities are carried out in traditional villages.

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28 Calvin, *Institutio*, 137.
30 GKS members who still have Marapu family usually feel very sad and burdened, as well as guilty, if their family member dies and has not had time to be baptized. They will usually ask for pastoral guidance in order to overcome their moral burden.
Besides Calvin’s teachings, the influence of Pietism is also obvious. As explained by Wellem, the spirit of Pietism also influenced the views of missionary institutions in the Netherlands through their ministers who were delegated to carry out evangelism in Sumba. The influence of Pietism is visible in expressions of piety such as working by faith and depending on God’s guidance. Calvinist belief and Pietism influenced the views of GKS pastors in their encounters with their Marapu followers. This understanding of Calvinism and Pietism has permeated GKS’s theological thoughts and views to this day.

**A Constructive Paradigm Based On 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1**

Here I offer a constructive paradigm based on the text of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1. The text is part of Paul’s message concerning food sacrificed to idols. The choice of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 is based on the similarities between the theological concerns/topics arising from the church of Corinth and the concerns regarding Sumbanese Christians’ participation in Marapu rituals in the present day, which includes sacrificial meat-offering.

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Even though the topic under discussion is similar, the contexts of the Corinthian church and the Sumba church are clearly different.\textsuperscript{34}

I am also aware that there seems to be an inconsistency in Paul’s teachings in his letter to the Corinthians. On the one hand, he forbids eating meat offered to idols (10:14-22), but on the other hand, he allows it (chapters 8 and 10:23-11:1). One biblical scholar understands Paul’s prohibition as inseparable from his Christology, which emphasizes the concept of one God and one body in Christ.\textsuperscript{35} I agree with the opinion of Hargreaves that this letter of Paul should be seen not as a law book for Christians but as writing that can inspire Christians to find truth for each generation.\textsuperscript{36}

According to Hargreaves, the main problem faced by the church at Corinth was the eating of meat that had been offered to idols during celebrations in the temples in honor of the Greek gods. As was customary, the meat of the sacrificial animal was partly eaten in the temple (10:14-12), partly eaten at home (10:27), and partly sold in the market (10:25). As citizens of the city, the Corinthian Christians were often invited to attend these public celebrations and to enjoy meat offered to idols at communal meals both at the temple and at home. These different contexts posed problems for the Christians with regard to eating meat that had been offered to idols.\textsuperscript{37}

According to Brownlee, in the Christian congregation at Corinth there were two opposing groups on this issue, namely, the antinomians and the legalists. Antinomians argue that all laws no longer apply to Christians because Christians had already gained the freedom and knowledge that other people do not have. Christians may eat meat offered to idols because idols did not really exist. Meanwhile, legalists argued that traditional laws were still applicable to Christians. One of the most important laws for Christians was to abstain from food that had been contaminated by idols (cf. Acts 15:20). On that basis Christians should not compromise with the

\textsuperscript{34} Reverend Lambooij said that the difference was that Sumba did not recognize the concept of gods and goddesses. The purpose of slaughtering sacrificial animals and eating meat together is to maintain fellowship, including with ancestors who have died. End, \textit{Sumber-sumber Zending}, 452-453.

\textsuperscript{35} Pranoto, “Hubungan antara Kristologi Paulus”: 276.

\textsuperscript{36} John Hargreaves, \textit{A Guide to 1 Corinthians} (Delhi: ISCPK, 1987), 134.

\textsuperscript{37} Hargreaves, \textit{A Guide}, 99.
pagan world and pagan practices. According to Brownlee, Paul did not follow the views of these two groups.38

Other interpreters argue that the group in the congregation that displayed an attitude of being actively involved in temple celebrations and eating meat offered to idols came from a Greek background, while the group that held the opposing view came from a Jewish background. Meat offered to idols was a problem for the Jewish congregation because the meat was not pure.39 The Jewish congregation rejected this attitude due to the legacy of the teachings of the holiness code in Israel’s religion, which still strongly influenced them. Touching or eating unclean food would make them unholy.40

In this situation Paul wrote to the church at Corinth. According to Barclay, the text of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 is the part of the letter in which Paul concludes a long discussion about food offered to idols with some practical advice. Paul’s advice was that the Corinthian congregation could eat sacrificial meat sold in the market without having to worry about the origin of the meat. The Corinthian congregation may eat in gratitude to God because everything belongs to God and was created by God.41

The church in Corinth was also allowed to eat the sacrificial meat served at banquets in the homes of pagans. If any brother was disturbed in his conscience because of eating such meat, then, according to Paul, Christians must be willing to sacrifice their freedom to eat meat for the sake of their brother. Here, Paul emphasizes the importance of maintaining fellowship in the Corinthian church as well as being an example for the Greek community around them.42

Other interpreters state that the text of 1 Corinthians 10:23-11:1 is a summary, refinement, and application of Paul’s entire view on the subject.

38 Malcolm Brownlee, Pengambilan Keputusan Etis dan Faktor-faktor di dalamnya (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1982), 57-58.
42 Barclay, Letters, 94.
of eating meat offered to idols. Paul asserts that everything is permissible for him (twice he affirms the same thing). This statement indicates that Christians have freedom. The freedom that Christians have should also be used in their relationships with fellow believers. So it’s not freedom that is excessive or selfish, but freedom that has a purpose, namely, for the benefit of others.43

For Paul, everything is allowed because the earth and everything in it belongs to God (1 Cor 10:26 cf. 1 Cor 3:22-23 and 24:1). Paul asserts that there are no idols, that there is no other god but God, and that all things are from God (compare also 1 Cor 8:6; 3:21-23).44

Paul’s statements above are included in his advice to the church at Corinth to guide them in discerning responsible ethical-theological decisions and choices regarding the issue of eating sacrificial meat. Indeed, there are many factors that influence Christian ethical decision-making. All these factors need balanced attention.45

How does the context of the Corinthians compare with the context of the Sumbanese? From the discussion above, it is clear that Christians should care for one another and put the interests of others above their personal freedom; they must also seek to maintain church fellowship. Therefore, the issue for Paul is not whether or not he should eat meat offered to idols, but whether by eating meat a Christian would interfere with the faith of his brother. If the Christian’s action scandalizes others, then the choice is not to eat meat. Paul asks the Corinthians to use their freedom not to eat meat out of love and concern for brothers who are weak in faith.

When compared with the context of Sumba, there are a few differences. The congregation in Sumba is not dealing with fellow Christians who are weak in faith, but with their kinsmen who are Marapu. If a Sumbanese Christian refuses to take and eat meat given just because the meat has been used for the Marapu ritual, then such a refusal will break the kinship with their brothers or sisters and hence hurt their brother and sister’s feelings.

Therefore, in the context of Sumba, if the GKS community eats the meat offered by their brothers and sisters who believe in Marapu and

their actions will have a good impact on their kinsmen, then this action is theologically and ethically permissible and fits Paul’s explanation. The good impact is that the brother and sister will feel appreciated and accepted as part of the family. Their non-Christian neighbors do not feel harassed, rejected, alienated, or betrayed.

The kinship should not be damaged because of the prohibition on eating meat offered to idols. This has also been realized and stated by Pastor P.J. Lambooij in his letter to the Nederlands Zendings Genootschap when he had to account for his attitude in choosing to eat the meat that the Sumbanese gave him.\(^46\)

Respect for human dignity in Sumba culture is a central issue. This is based on the understanding that humans are God’s creations and must be appreciated and respected.\(^47\) Respect is manifested through a communal meal. Meat that is served with sincerity and respect must be received with equal sincerity and respect. This creates an attitude of mutual respect between the giver and the recipient of the meat.

**Jesus as a Role Model**

In chapter 11:1 of 1 Corinthians, Paul states that the Corinthians should pay attention to imitating Jesus. Paul asked the Corinthians to follow Jesus as their role model. Imitating Jesus must be the main and dominant thing in the life of the congregation.\(^48\)

In his ministry Jesus presents himself differently from the Pharisees with regard to practicing the religious laws/codes. If the Pharisees’ approach and interpretation of the Jewish laws was strictly rigid and tended to fall into legalism, then Jesus’s way was the opposite.

Jesus ate with sinners, that is, with those on the streets who were looked down upon by the Pharisees for not understanding and practicing the law.\(^49\) Jesus did not turn away from sinners. Instead, Jesus came to the sinner’s house, sat down, and ate the food prepared by the sinner.

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46 End, *Sumber*, 453.
47 Tunggul, *Etika*, 34, 143.
According to Jewish law, Jesus’s actions lead to uncleanliness. Jewish law asserts that sitting and eating with sinners is a self-defiling act that requires confessional ritual in the temple in order to be purified again. Jesus actually did something different, which Dunn, as cited by Burridge, describes as “bypassing the cult.”

This ethical act of Jesus was not without purpose. According to Burridge, Jesus chose to associate with sinners because they, too, needed to hear the preaching of the kingdom of God. Jesus’s action was motivated by the concern to save sinners. That is why in Mark 2:17 Jesus emphasizes that it is not healthy people who need a doctor but sick people. He did not come to call the righteous, but the sinner.

That means to follow Jesus and imitate his attitude, Christians must be able to accept others, especially those who are categorized as sinners. Following Jesus means not only following his commandments in pursuit of holiness, but also imitating his gracious words and actions, which reflect God’s mercy and his all-embracing love, especially toward those who are seen as sinners.

In relation to the context of church ministry in Sumba, the GKS ban on its congregations regarding meat offered to Marapu needs to be rescinded based on the attitude and teachings of Jesus. Paul reminds the Corinthians to imitate Christ, so the church in Sumba must be willing to imitate Christ by accepting and maintaining fellowship with their Marapu kinsmen.

**Salvation as a Common Identity**

Salvation can be understood as forming one’s identity in that on the one hand it is a point of separation from, but on the other hand a point of connection between GKS and Marapu members, especially when it is seen from the universal nature of God’s work of salvation. Knitter describes the universal nature of God’s work as the “fundamental religious fact.”

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51 Burridge, *Imitating*, 76.
52 Burridge, *Imitating*, 77-78.
Theologically the root of the identity problem is the view of salvation, which, in the GKS’s view, is different from the Marapu’s.

For GKS, again, in line with Calvin’s understanding, salvation is exclusively reserved for Christians. Consequently, the people of Marapu will not attain salvation. Marapu people, as the first human category, will experience destruction and receive eternal punishment as a result because of their idolatrous worship. If the people of Marapu want to be saved, then they must leave the old way of life. They have to break with their old community and accept Jesus. They have to be baptized into the church and enter the new community of faith, the Christian community.

Meanwhile, according to Marapu belief, the concept of salvation cannot be separated from the basic features of a communal life, which is interrelationship with one another, balance, and harmony. Salvation is associated with a harmonious relationship between humans, the divine, and nature. If the relationship is disturbed or damaged, then it will adversely affect the safety of humans, both individual and communal. Therefore various rituals are carried out to maintain harmony.

God has unveiled the recipe for a harmonious life through the Marapu tradition. This procedure must be obeyed by the Sumbanese from generation to generation to obtain salvation. The procedure is given the term nuku-hara (law and way). The Most High as a source of law and way of life is called Ina Nuku-Ama Hara (Mother of Law-Father of Way). Based on this understanding, disregarding this procedure of balanced and harmonious living and refusing to perform the appropriate rituals can potentially disrupt and destroy the order of living together.

It is these differing claims of salvation that have resulted in the identity crisis of the Sumbanese. This claim is also the cause of relationship problems between adherents of different religions. In response to this condition, Paul F. Knitter’s thoughts are enlightening. In his book No Other

54 Calvin’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10 shows an understanding that distinguishes the identity of the Christians in Corinth from the pagans. For Calvin the idol worshipers are human beings who deserve God’s punishment for uniting themselves with Satan. John Calvin, Commentary on Corinthians, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1999), 238.

55 Calvin, Institutio, 136-137.

56 Tunggul, Etika, 21, 31-33.

57 Kapita, Masyarakat, 81.
Name, he writes that the task of Christians and all adherents of the world’s religions is to talk and listen to one another so that all religions grow with and from other religions and together unite in the pursuit of prosperity and well-being, the salvation of all humankind.58

If Knitter’s thoughts are adapted to the Sumbanese context, then all people of any religion must be able to create interfaith dialogue. Christians and Marapu people can become dialogue partners who enrich one another’s identity even though they come from different faith traditions. Together they can unite in an effort to realize the welfare and salvation of all humankind.

Furthermore, following Knitter’s view, the problem of identity for Sumbanese Christians can be “solved” with an “ecumenical” approach among adherents of different religions. This pattern strives to realize “unity without destroying differences.” This pattern affirms “a common origin and purpose, a transcendent principle or mystery, a basis for shared experience that is active in all religions.” This basic religious fact, as Panikkar, quoted by Knitter, points out, does not exist in religious doctrines or teachings or even individual self-consciousness.59 “This fundamental religious fact is present anywhere and in every religion. It is this fundamental religious fact that is a known mystery in every authentic religious experience, but it is always more than what religious experience can feel and say.”60

This theological thought contends that God’s work of salvation is beyond the concept of human comprehension, beyond any doctrine or teaching of any religion in the world, including the teachings of Christianity and Marapu. Realizing the mystery or fundamental religious fact, there is no obstacle for Christians and Marapu adherents to accept, learn from, and dialogue with one another. Through dialogue, each side is moved to remove ingrained prejudices, correct preconceived ideas, and allow understanding of faith to be refined.61

58 Knitter, No Other Name, 231.
59 Knitter, No Other Name, 231.
60 Knitter, No Other Name, 231.
CONCLUSION

The act of sharing a meal in the context of Sumbanese ritual is a sign of fellowship and a form of brotherhood-sisterhood. Sharing a meal between Sumbanese Christians and their tribal relatives is a theological act reflecting a Christ-imitating attitude of faith, that is, imitating Jesus’s gracious words and actions to all people. Christians and Marapu people can become dialogue partners who enrich each other’s identity even though they come from different faith traditions.62

Finally, I would like to highlight a few points of recommendation to the Christian community in Sumba. First, there is no prohibition by the Marapu people against Christians taking part in the communal meals they organize as part of their ritual activities. The meat of the slaughtered animal that is distributed to all family members and relatives is a sign of fellowship and a form of brotherhood-sisterhood. The Marapu members do not intend to trick the GKS members by giving them “unclean” meat so that they become impure because parts of the liver and the umbilical cord have been used to communicate with Marapu. The Marapu people do not intend to provoke the Christians into betraying their faith in Jesus Christ by eating the meat. The people of Marapu, through the act of sharing the meat, just want to emphasize that the Christians are still brothers and sisters, even though they have different beliefs. Differences in beliefs between Christians and Marapu adherents do not have to cut off the familial ties among them as Sumbanese.

Second, GKS should not continue to condemn its members without sufficient theological reasons. It is time for GKS to rethink its current stance regarding the meat offered to Marapu as forbidden food. It is important for GKS to accept and treat the food as a token of fellowship instead of conceiving of it as impure and forbidden. Renewing this understanding should be based on the study of the biblical text and the Sumbanese cultural “text,” including the teachings and values of Marapu.

Third, GKS’s contextual constructive and critical attitude toward Marapu ritual practices must be built on a thorough understanding of the law of holiness in the Old Testament to which Paul and several writers allude in the New Testament. It must also be culturally sensitive of the Sumbanese

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62 The renewal of the Christians’ attitude, however, could lead to a new issue, namely, conflict between Christians, but this is beyond the scope of this article.
context and Marapu teachings that are still deeply rooted within the hearts of GKS members today.

Fourth, GKS needs to continue to equip its members with a contextual approach to the Christian faith, namely, an approach to faith that takes the context of the Sumbanese people into account. In this way, GKS can interact with their Marapu brothers and sisters with a sense of mutual need, acceptance, respect, and in the spirit of learning from one another’s different identities and faith traditions.

Fifth, GKS as a Christian community in Sumba along with the Marapu community share the same calling to salvation and humanitarian mission. The GKS and Marapu members have the duty and responsibility to work together to save people from suffering and poverty.

About author
Irene Umbu LOLO (D.Th, Jakarta Theological Seminary) is a lecturer in liturgy and cultural studies at Theological Seminary of The Christian Church of Sumba, Indonesia.