

# Embracing the traces of the deity Opo Empung in Minahasa for culturative Christianity



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The conversation about God has the potential to generate constructive discussion because it is the central theme of various religious traditions in Indonesia. The belief of the Minahasa community, one of the tribes in Indonesia, regarding the expression of the Opo Empung deity has become a matter of debate because it contains mystical values. But on the other hand, there have been attempts to integrate the understanding of the divine with Christianity, but they have not achieved satisfactory results. This study sought to find the deity value of Opo Empung with a constructive intercultural approach, which can be an object of dialogue and discussion for the Christian religion so as to offer respect, tolerance and peace. This study used a qualitative approach. The main sources that were used as references are library data, articles, books and other scientific references, combined with ethnographic data collection. The results showed that the expression of the deity Opo Empung offers an object of conversation for interaction with religion. It represents strong religious values. This cultural reality opens up opportunities for interactive conversations between Christianity and cultural beliefs in order to create a harmonious and peaceful life.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** Churches and Christians in Minahasa and Indonesia need to minimise conflicts with local culture. The church could be a light for the local culture to know God properly and a bridge to build religious tolerance and moderation. It should accept and befriend local culture considered by people as a religion for generations.

**Keywords:** Opo Empung; deity; religion; Minahasa; culture.

## Introduction

Discourse on God is a central and neutral theme for inter-religious and cultural dialogue. It is neutral because every tradition has a narrative about God, articulated in various expressions, and it is central. In this regard, the term 'central' means that God is the centre of the universe. However, hermeneutic differences lead to contradicting interpretations and create social conflicts. Hendrik M. Vroom once provoked the thoughts of religious groups by asking whether all religious traditions worship the same God (Vroom 1990). Furthermore, Ilkka Pyysiäinen and Kimmo Ketola state that conversations about God must not exclude certain religions or cultures. This is because the intuitive emic concept approach is more appropriate and accommodates the values of God's omnipotence holistically, comprehensively and purely (Pyysiäinen & Ketola 1999). Discussions about God would be more contributive when placed in cultural studies. However, the emic concept approach could offer peace and constructive ideas, because it is drawn from indigenous cultures and local values. Moreover, the intersection of religious communities is avoidable, because the idea of God in cultural studies does not represent a particular religious label. According to Kenneth Nehrbass, culture is rooted in the divine resonance of the Creator, meaning that religious communities, especially Christians, should develop a cultural personality (Nehrbass 2016). Three contributions could be embraced. Firstly, foster tolerance between religious and cultural communities to build mutual respect's traditions (Aasland 2019). Secondly, religion could better understand God's expression in the cultural traditions of indigenous people. Thirdly, the divine concept could be an object of acculturation and inculturation to integrate Christianity and culture. In this regard, Sonny Zaluchu states that God's name is easy to understand, based on local people's thinking with its sociocultural construction (Zaluchu 2021).

The encounter between Christianity and culture in Minahasa resulted in horizontal social conflicts, where both traditions stand opposite to each other, separately, in a disharmonious life. For instance, the word *opo*, which means ancestor, has had its meaning changed and is integrated with

demonic things. Christians have negative sentiments about the meaning of the term *opo* (Pinontoan 2015). This converted stigma causes ambivalence between Christians and believers in Minahasa. Furthermore, another struggle occurred within the internal Gereja Masehi Injili Minahasa (GMIM), which tried to reconstruct the *opo* concept as a Minahasa theology (Tulaar 1993). However, this led to struggles and other conflicts because of the negative connotation attached to the term. Furthermore, the practice of *foso kampetan* is interpreted negatively as a tradition involving evil spirits, implying that the participants are possessed (Pinontoan n.d.).

The efforts made by theologians in Minahasa must be considered an attempt to reconcile and integrate Christian values and indigenous culture. However, field actualisation shows that the contextualisation efforts further divide religious and cultural identities, causing theological conflicts. Therefore, another approach is needed, not limited to matching cultural and religious theology but understanding of cultural expressions. The *opo* concept is potentially a neutral discussion material and a meeting ground between Christianity and Minahasa culture. When Christianity and the local community traditions are bridged, the result is an identity tug-of-war, as shown by researchers, humanists and theologians. Similarly, when the Christian concept is reconstructed, it could be translated and accepted by indigenous peoples. As a result, there is the potential for the Christian sacred values to be violated and sacrificed. Therefore, this study offers another alternative to embrace and find expressions about Opo Empung in Minahasa cultural emics as an object of conversation on a deity from a Christian perspective.

Opo Empung is an expression of the Minahasa people for describing the Most High (Sopacoly, Lattu & Timo 2019). The religious community interprets it as the highest God in the Christian tradition. Also, there are other terms in indigenous languages besides Opo Empung, such as *Opo Walian Wangko* (Mukar et al. 2020), *Empung Walian Wangko*, *Kasuruan Wangko*, *Empung* and *Rengarengan*. These titles refer to the Most High as Creator, source of life (long life, good luck, health and prosperity), guardian and protector. Opo Empung punishes and expresses anger at disobedience (Saruan 1991). Based on the diversity of the Minahasa people in mentioning the Most High, Opo Empung is the most-used term in community practices and activities. Furthermore, there is no significant difference between the Most High terms understood by the Minahasa people, and Opo Empung has accommodated other pronunciations.

This study does not attempt to contextualise the *Opo Empung* but determine the value of deity as a useful discussion space. Furthermore, this study offers a constructive intercultural approach instead of contextual study. It assumes that Opo Empung is a discussion object that allows interaction with Christianity because it expresses a deity friendly with modern meaning. Therefore, this study examines the expression of the Opo Empung deity in the Minahasa native

tradition that could become an object of conversation with God's values from a Christian perspective. Furthermore, it reflects on the divinity dimension of Opo Empung, useful as a means to interact with Christianity.

## Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach with ethnographical data from library literature, including articles, books and other scientific references. The informants comprised sociologists, theologians, humanists and tonaas (Lombok 2014). The data collected were processed and analysed to obtain a comprehensive idea about Opo Empung in Minahasa cultural emics. Furthermore, Opo Empung's values were used as material for religious discussions to create an integration that reconciles or reduces potential conflicts. The cultural expressions contribute to contextualisation activities and Christian missions in Minahasa.

## Discussion

### From contextual to in cultural approach

What is contextual theology? Most religions attempt to formulate a solid formula that could engage with local culture. In general, the leading approach to this discussion is contextual theology. Pears (2009:1) describes contextual theology as Christian theology that is shaped by local context, with its all controversial and problematic implications. With this in mind, contextual theology focuses on Christian theology on how its values could be interpreted into the culture. Therefore, inculturation theology is an alternative formulation. Bosch (1991:420) argues that inculturation cares about the relationship between Christian faith and local culture. Moreau et al. (2000:476) states that the inculturation approach seeks the original values of local culture, how the indigenous people maintain their tradition and starting with the culture as focus of attention instead of Christianity. In the other word, inculturation's attention is on the culture itself. Culture is the centre of study that needs to be invited into an inter-religious discussion to construct a new paradigm that is hospitable to both Christianity and local culture.

Based on this idea, in order to grasp the values of Opo Empung in Minahasa, constructive inculturation is a promising approach that would contribute to the discussion. Thereby, the first step is that cultural heritage in Minahasa concerning their knowledge on the Opo Empung deity will receive primary attention. All insights should be grasped originally from the people who have no Christian worldview. This stage is sensitive, as Christian dogma has combined with spiritual conception of Minahasans, leading to debates and problems. Second step, the cultural values of Opo Empung should be free from any theological intervention; it should stand alone as Minahasan expression. Therefore, in this research, all the characters, values and philosophies of Opo Empung will be described from the core heart of Minahasans in order to gain a grand picture that could be encountered by Christian theology.

## Polytheist or monotheist?

Various designations for the Most High give the stigma that the ancient religion in Minahasa is monotheistic. However, Geryni Timpal states that the God believed in by the Minahasa people does not have a name. Moreover, the term Opo Empung and its variants express the work of God. For instance, *Empung Walian Wangko* and *Empung Rengah-Rengah* refer to God as the Most High and the Most Great (Timpal, Makarau & Wuisang 2017). According to *tonaas* Rinto Taroreh (2021), Opo Empung was a product created later, while *Empung Walian Wangko* and *Empung Rengah-Rengah* are much older names. This applies to other terms with their respective places. The various names of the Most High show that the divinity of the indigenous people contains elements of monotheism. Therefore, the known God only refers to a single person with various titles and functions in society. The Minahasa people use ancestral spirits to ward off and fight evil spirits (Timpal et al. 2017). This ancestral spirit concept was then autonomised as another god, giving rise to a polytheistic impression.

Traces of Opo Empung's monotheism are seen in the tradition of folk songs. In a song titled *Esa Mokaan*, Maukar defines Opo Walian as the only God. Furthermore, ancient texts reveal that Opo Empung Walian is the source of all life that controls the land where humans stand and provides knowledge of everything (Mukar et al. 2020). Even in the songs' verses, the monotheistic nature of Opo Empung is expressed to refute the notion that Minahasa's beliefs are polytheistic.

The confusion of Opo Empung's numerical issues is closely related to the negative stigma of other mentions referring to the power of black magic. *Opo* means ancestor, grandfather or grandmother, someone with something or a respected teacher. A Minahasa tradition believes in evil spirits, *opo-opo*, and good spirits, Opo Empung (Education on a People's Economic System in Minahasa Customary Law n.d.). The term *opo* received negative perceptions from the Christian community and eroded the expression of kindness from Opo Empung. This struggle is experienced by the Minahasa community that has converted to Christianity. Furthermore, from a cultural perspective, it is believed that the *opo-opo* or the ancestors are integrated with negativity and are considered evil spirits. Opo Empung, the supreme God of life and goodness, is often associated with belief in evil spirits. However, Opo Empung is essentially a monotheistic description: God who gives goodness to humans. Traces of the Minahasa tradition through folk songs show that God is a single person worshiped by indigenous people. In addition, etymologically, various terms and designations for God only refer to one person as the Most High. These arguments emphasise that the main values of the Minahasa concept of God are monotheistic.

Jessy Wenas stated that ancient Minahasa people believed in polytheism, but monotheism was introduced by the Spanish and Portuguese in the 16th century (Wenas n.d.). Greyni Timpal supported the fact that the people worshiped many

gods, also called polytheism (Timpal et al. 2017). However, the assumption that the ancient Minahasa people were polytheists needs a more in-depth study, because Wenas Timpal drew this conclusion based on the reality that the Spanish and Portuguese introduced the Catholic religion. Since they were solid with monotheists, it is easy to understand tribal religious beliefs as polytheistic forms. Furthermore, there is the possibility of an inaccurate interpretation of the Minahasa divinity concept because there are contradictory meanings regarding Opo Empung. This is because of the various designations of the Most High in the Minahasa tradition, with the potential to lead to conflicting interpretations.

In agreement with Wenas, Greenhill Weol (2021) stated that customary terms or cultural words in the Minahasa community have a special meaning that is different from other terms. Various names of the Most High are often integrated with words commonly understood by modern society. However, no other word appropriately describes the personality and figuring of Opo Empung's divinity. The translation of the divine character gave rise to new names and titles for the Creator. This implied that the Minahasa people worshiped many gods and were polytheists, although they only worshiped one God. Furthermore, the term *opo*, which means parents, ancestors, seniors and predecessors, has a special place in the social system. Therefore, in certain rituals, people pay homage to ancestors, or *opo*, parents who have preceded living people. This respect is often considered a form of worship, resulting in the conclusion that the *opo* is a divine god or a person. As a result, this suggests that the Minahasa people worship many gods and are magical because they worship the *opo-opo*. However, they essentially recognise only one Creator, Opo Empung, with various terms consistent with their theological needs. Therefore, the basic values of Opo Empung express a strong characteristic of monotheism, with a vague trace of polytheism.

## Trinitarian or Unitarian?

Rikson Karundeng (2021), in a ritual tribute to ancestors in Saroinsong Tomohon village, showed that the Minahasa community knows three popular gods. The gods are symbolised by three tobacco sticks rolled up on cigarette paper and placed on a *waruga* to respect their ancestors. *Kasuruan Masule*, *Manembo-nembo* and *Malinga-linga* are symbols of the three characters of the Most High. Specifically, *Kasuruan Masule* is a helper, *Malinga-linga* listens to complaints, while *Manembo-nembo* is a guardian and observer, always watching human life. Therefore, the Minahasa community is no stranger to the number three in spiritual activities. Furthermore, Greenhill Weol (2021) stated that the number three is a symbol easy to find in people's lives; even women often use the three-stone symbol in the kitchen. Therefore, it correlates with culinary identity and welfare. The community's closeness to the divine expression and the number three symbolism was a living tradition long before modern religions entered the Minahasa land. The Portuguese and Spanish who arrived in the 16th century introduced

Catholicism, while the Dutch, with their *zending*, spread Protestantism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. However, before the arrival of Catholicism and Protestantism, the Minahasa community already believed in various symbols with a distinctive meaning for culture and people's lives. Therefore, the number three symbol was not introduced by modern religions but is an original Minahasa element that existed long before the archipelago's colonialism.

The South Minahasa Pinaling area has a similar meaning, as stated by Junita Rompas. Based on reports from Spanish missionaries, the Minahasa people worshiped many gods and goddesses through religious rituals. This practice is a cultural heritage that continues to be preserved by the ancestors, although Opo Empung is the highest deity worshiped. Furthermore, there are three popular divine persons. Opo Empung *Renga-rengan* is the God who comes with power through human consciousness; Opo Empung *Wailan* symbolises wealth, masterpieces, the Creator and owner of the universe; while Opo Empung *Kasuruan* is the source of life (Rompas 2017). Therefore, the divine symbol of the number three is a pure cultural heritage that correlates strongly with the divine expression of the Opo Empung. However, monotheism could clash with the belief in three divine characters, which implies polytheism. Karundeng explicitly states that the Minahasa people only knew one person, the Most High, and they strongly rejected the label of polytheism.

The legend of the Minahasa people's origin is related to the number three, with various versions of the story in people's memories. Wenas shows that the original Minahasa religion recognised the gods in the sky: Karema is a grandmother, Lumimuut is a mother and Toar is a child (Wenas 2007). These three ancestors are considered the beginning of people's lives. Furthermore, Mawuntu stated that three popular stories about the beginning of life are the most accepted. Firstly, a story by the *zending* or evangelists from the Netherlands states that the ancestors of the Minahasa people came from mainland China. Furthermore, the figure mentioned is Karema, then considered a Walian (leader of the highest traditional ritual), with a daughter named Lumimuut. As Karema saw the importance of having offspring, Lumimuut had to face the cardinal directions to conceive offspring. When facing west, Lumimuut conceived and gave birth to a son named Toar. Secondly, Karema is interpreted as being initially attached to the universe as the beginning of everything and is considered a pioneer or opening the way. As she is the beginning of wisdom, Lumimuut is described as the morning dew or the sweat of the ground, the early morning opener. In contrast, Toar is considered a pillar supporting the strength of the mind and heart. Thirdly, a great flood hit the Earth; then a woman named Lumimuut was stranded and found by Karema. After some time, Karema found Toar, a strong man (Mawuntu 2017). Furthermore, the tradition regarding the origin of the Minahasa people is close to the number three symbolism. However, this does not mean that the number three correlates with a particular religious deity or the Trinity in Protestantism.

## Sacred or profane?

Freddy Wowor states that the relationship between Opo Empung and the Minahasa community is symbolised as that between parents and children. This terminology is used because it is considered the closest to describe the concept of the deity Opo Empung. However, Wowor states that the Creator in the Minahasa people's perspective could not be articulated or discussed in modern concepts. On the contrary, the divine essence is only approached and given the closest description or symbol but cannot be matched with any narrative. Furthermore, Rikson Karundeng emphasises that the divine that existed before the universe was created, meaning that Opo Empung, is a *suru* or seed of life, and it must be interpreted sacredly. In line with Karundeng, Iswan Sual, a follower of Malesung's belief in Minahasa, insists that God is *chaka angean* and cannot be understood and reached. Moreover, the Creator existed before creation, and the ancestors could not sufficiently explain how God appeared. As a result of limited knowledge and sacredness, Opo Empung is rarely discussed in the Minahasa community. It is even considered *foso*, something forbidden to be discussed carelessly to avoid mistakes.

As the beginning of the universe and a sacred person, the Minahasa people interpret God as a person who cannot be touched and described in modern articulations. The best way to do this is to approach the divine with human symbols and language. Therefore, the naming and construction of the Creator cannot represent the meaning of the Opo Empung deity in the Minahasa people's perspective.

The holiness and greatness of the Creator could be compared with the supernatural powers of the Minahasa ancestors, because *Opo* or *Apo* means ancestor. The legacy of legends in the Minahasa land tells of the greatness and fame of the very significant ancestors. Therefore, Iswan Sual made a comparison with Opo Empung, the ancestor of great ancestors. This means that the Minahasa ancestors had phenomenal greatness. Therefore, the sacred Opo Empung and the beginning of all things are much greater to be described holistically and comprehensively. Even in traditional rituals, the name Opo Empung is only mentioned once a month. The ceremony begins concerning the Creator, followed by a request for protection, the delivery of *nuwuh* or advice, and healing practices. Furthermore, a celebration of eating together is held at the end of the ritual. Through this ritual, the divine character is expressed to the Minahasa people.

With this coherent thinking, the religious frame of mind cannot understand the deity pattern of society. When bringing a dogmatic religious system into the dining culture room, it is rejected because of its unsuitable ideas. Therefore, Wowor emphasises the need to give up religious thinking and explore divine aspects from a local perspective. God's sacredness is considered special, something that humans cannot observe. This emphasises the fundamental difference between humans and Opo Empung, where something sacred cannot be approached profanely. People's understanding

and beliefs are the closest description but do not fully describe God and its nature. Therefore, the Minahasa concept of deity is limited to divine expressions and values, without personifying or understanding it.

There has been an effort to draw God in its entirety into the profane world for society to obtain a comprehensive formulation regarding his person. Traditional rituals are believed to be a tribute to Opo Empung, although most cultural sacraments are a form of respect for ancestors. For instance, Maria Pratiknjo and Rully Mambo state that offering the rat stamp in rituals was a gift to Opo Empung, accompanied by folk songs and traditional dances (Pratiknjo & Mambo 2019). Moreover, Pinontoan reveals that offerings were tobacco, drinking water, coffee, tea and cake. Conversely, the rat stamp and other offerings are not addressed to the Creator but are a communication with the souls of the ancestors. This practice is known as *mu'kur* in Minahasa, where a certain community group or a family prepares a table with various offerings as a form of respect for ancestors (Pinontoan 2015). Similarly, *kampetan* is a medium for Opo Empung to interact with the community. According to Tumbelaka and Lattu, the real meaning of *kampetan* is that the ritual leader is possessed by the ancestors and conveys advice from the ancestors to the Minahasa people (Tumbelaka, Lattu & Samiyono 2020). Therefore, other customary and sacramental rituals do not correlate with the self-approach to Opo Empung. Instead, these traditions are expressions of appreciation and respect for ancestors. Therefore, the belief that customary rituals articulate Opo Empung contradicts its true meaning. According to the Minahasa community, the Creator is sacred and cannot be personified comprehensively.

The expression of Opo Empung's sacredness is reflected in the culture of gratitude. Erick Lobja states that Opo Empung is the ruler of the universe and controls all seeds, fields, crops, plantations and livestock. Therefore, when the harvest season arrives, the community gives respect and gratitude for an abundant harvest (Lobja et al. 2019). Furthermore, the Creator is manifested in natural wealth and produce. The communities approach Opo Empung using natural mediation to construct their divine characteristics and expressions. They do not define crops as God but interpret rice harvests and plantations as direct interventions, creating room for interaction. Gratitude culture is ultimately a form of human conversation thanking God. The thanksgiving shows how something sacred meets the profane, Opo Empung, as the almighty interacts with earthly creatures. Furthermore, its sacredness requires profane beings to communicate using mediation. Rina Pamantung states that typical Minahasa foods and drinks such as *nasi jaha*, *saguer*, tobacco, rat stamp and others are mediators between humans and Opo Empung. However, it was later transformed into a symbol of blessing (Pamantung 2019). There is a steep distance between Opo Empung and modern humans who demand the media to interact and communicate about life. In conclusion, Opo Empung is a sacred person for the Minahasa community, and its figure cannot be explored and embraced by

religious approaches or other ways of thinking. On the contrary, one must free oneself from other deity concepts to holistically digest Opo Empung's expression. Therefore, the current description is only a symbol and the closest articulation that describes Opo Empung.

## Conversation and interaction

Conversations about Christian divinity invite in-depth systematic theological discussions and require serious and sensitive dogmatic studies. Furthermore, there is the potential for doctrinal coercion to allow Christian religious teachings to be accepted and compatible with local cultural expressions. For instance, the expression of Opo Empung shows that the Minahasa people are familiar with the number three. They recognise that the values of God are the personification of Opo Empung, including *Kasuruan Masule*, *Manembo-nembo*, and *Malinga-linga*. This value does not conflict with Christian dogmas about the Trinity. It has the potential to generate conflict and struggle when it allows integration with the teachings of other religions. However, when the Trinity concept is articulated into the ideas of the Minahasa people, there would be no significant difficulties because they are familiar with it through local literacy. This is another problem for Bible doctrine, because it must tolerate and even allow for syncretism. Also, another opportunity is offered by the concept of monotheism of the Minahasa people. In this regard, cultural legitimacy considers that Opo Empung is a single person not represented or understood in other figures. Therefore, the traditional elders firmly confirmed that the beliefs of the Minahasa community were monotheistic. This is in line with the Christian faith that there is only one God. With this opportunity, the syncretism is wide open to acculturate and inculturate Christian dogma and the expression of the Opo Empung deity. In a local perspective, even the Creator's sacredness supports Christian teachings that God is holy and cannot be analogous to any reality. The display is the closest symbol and language about God but cannot give a full description.

Christian dogmatics lose their purity by adopting such approaches. Also, the meaning of Opo Empung is transformed because its original expression becomes integrated with Christian values. Therefore, the encounter of Christian theology and Minahasa culture must be rightly placed. Furthermore, Opo Empung is useful as an object of theology because ancestral heritage would be appreciated by understanding the community's wisdom. This appreciation is followed by tolerance and could help maintain the uniqueness of the Minahasa concept of deity. Furthermore, Opo Empung's deity values prove that the material and objects of religious theologies, especially Christian doctrine, are found in local cultural expressions. Understanding the deity's expression offers a more interactive conversation, because there is no motivation to reconstruct theology or acculturate two different cultures. Furthermore, the efforts are only limited to recognising, understanding and appreciating the worldview of the Minahasa community. Therefore, there is no tug-of-war or strong competition between the Christian faith and Opo Empung's expression of deity.

## Conclusion

Opo Empung's expression of deity in Minahasa society represents strong religious values. It is an object of theology delegated by the ancestors and preserved as part of the local community's culture. This reality allows for interactive conversations between Christianity and cultural beliefs to create a harmonious and peaceful life. Understanding how the community interacts with the Creator encourages modern religions in Minahasa to appreciate religious diversity and theology.

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## Author's contributions

C.A.R. as the first author drafted the research backbone, sharpening the core of research, constructing its methodology, investigating references, and analysing systematic. J.S., acted as supervisor.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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