

DEATH AS CULTURAL TEXT: HERMENEUTICS OF TORAJA LANGUAGE AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

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Abstrak

Kematian dalam masyarakat Toraja tidak hanya dipahami sebagai peristiwa biologis, tetapi sebagai pengalaman budaya yang diungkapkan dan dimaknai melalui bahasa. Artikel ini bertujuan mengkaji bahasa Toraja tentang kematian sebagai teks budaya dengan menggunakan pendekatan hermeneutika bahasa yang dipadukan dengan perspektif teologi kontekstual. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif-interpretatif melalui studi pustaka dan analisis teks budaya terhadap istilah, ungkapan, serta narasi kematian dalam bahasa Toraja. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa bahasa Toraja (khususnya dalam Aluk To Dolo) memaknai kematian sebagai proses yang berlangsung secara bertahap, mempertahankan orang yang telah meninggal sebagai subjek sosial yang tetap berelasi dengan komunitas, serta membingkai kematian melalui metafora perjalanan yang kaya makna simbolik. Pembacaan hermeneutik memperlihatkan bahwa bahasa kematian Toraja membentuk pemahaman yang relasional, komunal, dan dinamis. Implikasi teologi kontekstual dari kajian ini menegaskan bahwa bahasa budaya dapat menjadi ruang refleksi iman yang membumi dan dialogis. Dengan demikian, artikel ini memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian bahasa dan sastra, khususnya dalam memahami narasi kematian sebagai teks budaya, sekaligus memperkaya pengembangan teologi kontekstual di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: bahasa Toraja; narasi kematian; teks budaya; hermeneutika bahasa; teologi kontekstual

Abstract

Death in Toraja society is not only understood as a biological event, but as a cultural experience that is expressed and interpreted through language. This article aims to examine the Toraja language about death as a cultural text by using a language hermeneutic approach combined with a contextual theological perspective. This research uses a qualitative-interpretive method through literature study and analysis of cultural texts on terms, expressions, and narratives of death in the Toraja language. The results of the study show that the Toraja language (especially in Aluk To Dolo) interprets death as a gradual process, maintaining the deceased as a social subject that remains related to the community, and framing death through the metaphor of a journey rich in symbolic meaning. Hermeneutic readings show that the Toraja language of death forms a relational, communal, and dynamic understanding. The contextual theological implications of this study confirm that cultural language can be a space for reflection on faith that is grounded and dialogical. Thus, this article contributes to the study of language and literature, especially in understanding the narrative of death as a cultural text, as well as enriching the development of contextual theology in Indonesia.

Keywords: Toraja language; death narrative; cultural texts; language hermeneutics; contextual theology

1. INTRODUCTION

Death is one of the most fundamental experiences in human life. However, the way humans understand and live it is never singular. Death is always told, interpreted, and negotiated

through the language that lives in a culture (Syam, 2018). Therefore, death is not only present as a biological event, but also as a linguistic and cultural event. Language becomes the primary medium that allows a community to narrate death, frame the

relationship between the living and the dead, and nurture the collective memory of the sustainability of life beyond the limits of death (Ardhian, 2023; Assmann, 2011; Ricoeur, 1981).

In Toraja society, especially the adherents of *Aluk To Dolo* (the ancestral religion of the Toraja people), death occupies a very important position in social and cultural life. Various terms, expressions, and ritual speech are used to mark the status of a deceased person, the transition process, and their relationship with the family and community left behind. The Toraja language does not simply refer to death as death, but describes it as a transitional process involving social, symbolic, and cosmological dimensions. Through language, death is understood as a change in status, not the termination of a relationship; as a journey, not an end; and as a communal event, not a purely individual experience (Baan et al., 2025).

A number of recent studies on Toraja culture have shown that death rituals, especially in the series of *Rambu Solo'* (death ceremonies), are loaded with symbolic meanings and collective narratives. These studies generally place rituals as an expression of cultural identity and an arena of encounter between ancestral traditions and Christian faith (Kristanto et al., 2024; Tamin et al., 2021). However, most research still focuses on the structure of rites, ceremonial stages, or normative theological judgments. The language used to narrate death is often treated as a supporting element, so its role as a shaper of meaning has not been studied in depth. In fact, linguistic studies and analysis of contemporary discourse confirm that ritual language is not just a means of communication, but an active space for the formation of meaning. Language plays a role in shaping social reality, organizing shared memories, and directing the collective imagination of a community (Wodak & Meyer, 2015; Yunidar, 2025). In the context of Toraja, ritual speech, death status terms, and travel metaphors can be understood as cultural narratives that store a view of life and religious beliefs. Therefore, the Toraja

language about death deserves to be read as a cultural text that can be interpreted hermeneutically, not just ethnographically.

The hermeneutic approach of language allows language to be read as a world of meaning that is open to interpretation. Within the framework of hermeneutics, texts, including cultural texts and oral literature, do not stop at their original context, but continue to open up new understandings when read in dialogue with the context of the present (Handayani, 2025; Ricoeur, 1981). This approach is relevant for reading the Toraja language about death, because the terms and narratives used not only reflect past beliefs, but continue to be lived and reinterpreted by today's Toraja people, the majority of whom are already Christians.

On the other hand, theological reflection in Indonesia increasingly emphasizes the importance of contextual theology that departs from the concrete experiences of society, including local language and cultural symbols. Contextual theology does not aim to judge or eliminate cultural traditions, but to dialogue with them critically and reflectively so that faith can be lived in a grounded and meaningful way (Bevans, 2002; Enjeliana et al., 2026). In the context of Toraja, the dialogue between the Christian faith and the culture of death often takes place in a tension between respect for ancestral traditions and fidelity to the teachings of the church. Language is an important space in this tension, because it is there that the meaning of faith and culture meet. However, studies that specifically place the Toraja language on death as a cultural text read through language hermeneutics and directed at contextual theological reflection are still relatively limited. Theological research often moves from biblical texts to cultural practices, while the study of language and literature often stops at the analysis of form and function without linking it to a theological horizon. This gap is what this article aims to fill and do.

Departing from this context, this article places the narrative of death in the Toraja language as an entrance to understanding how death is

interpreted, negotiated, and inherited culturally. Using a linguistic hermeneutic approach, the Toraja death terms and narratives are read as a living cultural text, as well as a dialogue space for contextual theological reflection. Through this approach, the Toraja language is understood not only as a cultural heritage, but also as a medium of faith reflection that continues to shape the way the Toraja people understand life, death, and hope.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative-interpretive approach with a language hermeneutic framework combined with contextual theology. The qualitative approach was chosen because this study focuses on understanding the meaning, narrative structure, and symbolic function of language in a cultural context, rather than on statistical measurement. In the study of language and culture, this approach allows researchers to trace how language shapes social reality, nurtures collective memories, and organizes human experiences, including the experience of death (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The Toraja language on death is treated as a cultural text that is open to interpretation. Referring to Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, texts are understood to have relative autonomy from their speakers and open up a horizon of new meanings when read in dialogue with the context of today's readers (Ricoeur, 1981; Wahid, 2015). With this approach, the term and narrative of Toraja death are read as cultural narratives that shape the community's perspective on life, death, and the relationship with the transcendent.

The research data is qualitative and obtained from primary and secondary sources. Primary data include terms, expressions, and narratives of death in the Toraja language used in the context of rituals and daily life. Secondary data are derived from academic literature on Toraja language and culture, death rituals, discourse analysis, and contextual theology (Baan et al., 2022; Tamin et al., 2021). Data collection was

carried out through literature studies and documentation of cultural texts, with limited interviews to clarify the context of meaning when necessary (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991; Snyder, 2019; Zed, 2008).

Data analysis was carried out interpretively through the identification and grouping of terms and death narratives based on main themes, such as the process of transitioning from life and death, changes in social status, relationships with ancestors, and post-death images. Linguistic and narrative analysis pays attention to the lexical meanings, semantic functions, metaphors, and narrative patterns that frame death as a communal experience. This approach is in line with critical discourse analysis and conceptual metaphor studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The results of the analysis are then interpreted dialogically through language hermeneutics and dialogued with a contextual theological perspective, which understands theology as a reflection of faith born from the encounter between faith, human experience, and cultural context (Bevans, 2002). The validity of the interpretation is maintained through the consistency of the hermeneutic framework, the triangulation of sources, and the reflectivity of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Narrative of Death in the Toraja Language as a Cultural Text

The Toraja language about death, especially in *Aluk To Dolo*, cannot be understood as a mere collection of neutral terms. The language is present as a cultural narrative that frames the experience of death together. Through language, death is not only called or named, but told, postponed, negotiated, and interpreted in social relations (Syam, 2018). Therefore, the Toraja language about death can be understood as a cultural text, which is a text that stores and transmits the outlook on life, values, and religious imagination of the Toraja people. In this sense,

language functions not only as a means of communication, but also as a means of forming cultural meaning and identity (Assmann, 2011).

As a cultural text, the Toraja language about death has a distinctive narrative structure. Death is not spoken of as an event that is immediately completed when biological organs stop functioning, but is understood as a transitional process that takes place socially and symbolically. The terms and expressions used to refer to the deceased indicate that death is understood as a change in status, not as a termination of existence. Language deliberately delays the mention of death and replaces it with expressions that place death in the framework of relationships, waiting, and travel. This pattern shows that death is understood as a shared experience faced by the community, not as a purely individual event.

This view is in line with the understanding that narrative is the basic way humans organize life experiences, including experiences of suffering and death. Contemporary narrative studies affirm that humans understand reality through stories, and language is the main means of structuring experiences into meaningful plots (Sastrapradedja, 2012; Ricoeur, 1981). In the Toraja context, the language of death not only records the event of loss, but also directs the way communities respond to death emotionally, socially, and religiously. Thus, language is not only descriptive, but also performative, because it helps shape people's attitudes, actions, and expectations.

Linguistic-cultural studies of death rituals in Toraja society also show that ritual speech and death expressions contain strong symbolic meanings. Research by Baan shows that the Toraja death ritual discourse holds cultural attitudes that are inherited from generation to generation and continue to be lived through language (Baan et al., 2022). Ritual language not only accompanies the rite, but is the main means of expressing cosmological views and social relations in Toraja society. This confirms that the language of death

serves as a living cultural archive, where values and meanings are stored and constantly updated.

As a cultural text, the Toraja language about death also contains the dimension of collective memory. Expressions and narratives of death have always been related to the memory of ancestors and the history of the community. Language serves as a link between the past, present, and future. In the theory of cultural memory, language is understood as the main means that allow a community to remember and reinterpret its basic experiences (Assmann, 2011; Widiyanto, 2025). In the context of Toraja, the narrative of death is a way for the community to care for the memory of the deceased while affirming the sustainability of cross-generational relationships.

Furthermore, the Toraja language on death shows that death is not understood as a purely personal event, but as a public and communal event. The narrative of death is built and lived together through a language that is collectively understood. This is in line with the study of critical discourse which emphasizes that language is always related to social relations and values that live in a society (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In Toraja society, the language of death emphasizes the important role of the community in dealing with death and rejects views that reduce death to mere individual experience.

By reading the Toraja language about death as a cultural text, this study confirms that language not only reflects culture, but also shapes and maintains a certain way of understanding death. Language becomes a space where the experience of loss, relationships with the deceased, and the hope of life continuity are constantly negotiated. This understanding paves the way for a deeper hermeneutic reading, in which the terms and narratives of Toraja's death are not only linguistically analyzed, but also interpreted as a horizon of meaning that opens up the possibility of contextual theological reflection.

The Language of the Status of Death: Death as a Narrative Process

One of the important findings in the Toraja language about death is that death is not understood as an event that occurs suddenly, but rather as a process that takes place gradually. This is evident in the use of terms that mark a person's status from being on the verge of death until finally being recognized as socially dead. The Toraja language deliberately delays the determination of death through certain linguistic categories. In this way, death is understood as a socially and ritually negotiated process of transition, rather than simply as a biological fact. Terms such as *to makula'* and *to mamma'* are used to refer to people who have biologically stopped breathing, but have not yet been considered dead in a socio-cultural sense. Expressions such as *to makula' nataranak balla malassu na saladan balla makula'* (a person who is sick or feverish) represent a linguistic strategy that considers the deceased as a living person where the body still faces west and is still fed and drunk like a living person. A person is considered socio-culturally dead only if his body faces south and the death ceremony begins. The mention of *mamma'* (sleep) or *makula'* (sickness/fever) indicates a linguistic effort to soften and delay the reality of death, while maintaining social relations with the deceased. At this stage, the deceased person is still treated as a social subject present in family life, that is, cared for, cared for, and treated as if they are still part of the community. Language serves as a means of managing shock and grief, as well as giving communities time to prepare for the upcoming status changes.

The change in status towards *to mate* (the dead) is not determined by the cessation of the biological functions of the body, but by the ritual processes that accompany it. This is evidenced by the expression *la dipatiranmo sangka'na la dilampak dandan paleleanna. La dirundunan ada' sangtangka mayangna la ditete malangan sangka' sangbaroteng baluluknya*, which means that the traditional ceremony will soon be carried out. Thus,

the term *to mate* (the dead) marks the social validation of death, not just a physical condition. The Toraja language shows that death is a status achieved through symbolic and narrative processes. These findings are in line with the study of linguistic anthropology which confirms that in many cultures, the category of death is not only determined by the cessation of biological functions, but by social agreements formed through language and ritual (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Parry & Bloch, 1982).

This linguistic pattern shows that death is understood as an event that takes place in time, not as an end point that comes suddenly. The Toraja language constructs death as a process of becoming, not just ending. In this way, language helps the Toraja community maintain the continuity of the relationship between the living and the dead, and avoid sudden termination of relations. In the narrative framework, the language of death status serves as a bridge that connects life phases, death threshold periods, and post-death status. This narrative approach to death is in line with Paul Ricoeur's thinking about the relationship between time and narrative. Ricoeur explains that humans understand time through narrative, not directly. Events that are difficult to accept, such as death, become more understandable when told in the form of a narrative (Ricoeur, 1981). In the context of the Toraja language, the terms of death status serve as part of a narrative that helps communities organize the experience of loss together. Language not only records that a person has died, but also helps organize and give meaning to the experience of the time around the death event.

Recent studies of Toraja ritual discourse also show that the language of death status plays an important role in shaping people's attitudes towards the deceased. Baan et al. (2022) explain that ritual speech and the term death in Toraja culture reflect an attitude of respect and the view that relationships with the dead continue. Language does not emphasize a strict separation between life

and death, but rather helps society maintain social order and emotional balance in the face of death.

Thus, the language of the status of death in the Toraja society of *Aluk To Dolo* shows that death is a negotiated narrative event, not a passively accepted fact. Language is the main means for communities to manage grief, organize relationships, and give meaning to death as part of life's journey. This reading emphasizes that the analysis of the language of death status is not only related to vocabulary, but touches on the way in which a community understands human existence as a whole, namely about life, death, and relationships that transcend the two. This finding is an important basis for continuing the discussion on the relational dimension of death, namely how the deceased remains present as a social subject in the Toraja language narrative.

Relational Narrative: The Dead as Social Subjects

The Toraja language about death not only marks a change in a person's status, but also serves to maintain social relations between the living and the dead. Expressions which illustrates that death serves to maintain social relations between the living and the dead, and that death is a communal event, for example *inang senga' ke taruk siosso' mimi' to situran dadi merroro tiku tangkena lamban tasik uaka'*. *Natikui tama bating naapun tama mario*, which means that this death is felt by the extended family and community, many people feel that grief and each is present in their function and capacity.

One of the important features of the Toraja language about death is the use of linguistic categories that still treat the deceased as social subjects, not just as objects of memory. This is evident, for example, in the mention of the dead with the prefix *to* which means person, such as the term *to makula'* or *to mamma'*, as well as in the use of terms that refer to the existence of the soul or spirit. This linguistic practice shows that death is not understood as a loss of one's social presence,

but rather as a change in status in community relations. This understanding is clearly reflected in the use of direct greetings to the deceased. Expressions such as "*salama' melambi' mimamma' bangra, millik millik opo komi. Rampokan unto'longi komi*" (good morning, why are you still sleeping, wake up. We came to visit) shows that the dead are still treated as if they were alive and present. Similarly, when the family is going to carry out an activity or ceremony, the deceased person is often informed and asked for permission or blessing through special speech. This linguistic practice emphasizes that the relationship with the dead is maintained and lived through language. At this stage, the deceased person is still treated as part of family and community life, that is he or she is called, cared for, and placed as a subject present in social relations. Language serves as a means of managing shock and grief, while also giving communities time to adjust to the ongoing change in status. Thus, language not only reflects attitudes toward death, but also helps communities organize the emotional and social experiences that accompany them.

After the death ceremony is carried out and the spirit of the deceased person is understood to have become *to membali Puang* (ancestor/deity), the relationship is not broken, but undergoes transformation. Ancestors are believed to remain present in the life of the community as guides and givers of blessings, as expressed in the saying *to membali Puang la sule metaranak la tibalik mesaladan, ullendui' ra'pak ra'pakna lanmai rumumbena langi' palangkana gau'* (ancestors who have become gods will return as guides and blessings). This phrase suggests that the social presence of the dead continues in the form of symbolic and religious relationships.

Thus, the Toraja language serves as the main means to maintain the continuity of relationships and social identity that transcends the boundaries between life and death. Through the categories of language, greeting, and ritual speech, death is understood not as the termination of

relations, but as a change in the way of relating in community life.

The concept of *bombo mendeata* (the spirit of the deceased) in *Aluk To Dolo* plays an important role in this relational narrative. *Bombo mendeata* is not understood as a passive memory or simply a symbol of the past, but as a subject that remains present in the circle of family and community relations. It is real, for example, in the expression *la ma'umbari bombo mendeatanna te to memboko' to dolo kapuanganna la metiro lumbang la memanta lumele lako to ma'rapu tallang* (The spirit of the deceased will not go anywhere but will remain around us and will always watch and bless). *Loloknari riu mealla' tangkenari panggaga mebala ta tangsitiro lindo ta tangsimanta perupa* (very close to us and only limited by grass). Through language, deceased people are still mentioned, remembered, and presented in the story of social life. This linguistic practice shows that relationships with the dead do not stop at biological death, but continue in the form of symbolic and narrative relationships. Thus, the Toraja language frames death as a change in the form of a relationship, not as a complete termination of the relationship. From the point of view of linguistic-cultural studies, this linguistic pattern emphasizes the function of language as a medium that maintains the social structure of the community. Research on Toraja ritual discourse shows that death speech not only expresses grief, but also plays a role in reorganizing social relations through the practice of respect, remembrance, and recognition of the role of the deceased (Baan et al., 2022). In this way, the language of death serves as a cultural mechanism that helps maintain the togetherness and continuity of the community.

The relational narrative in the Toraja language also shows the strength of collective memory. The deceased is represented through language as part of the collective memory of the living community, for example in the *manguilala nenek lako ba'bana lembang manguissan to dolo lako pentutuanna lipu sanda kasaalle. Mentia'*

langkanpako mai saying kaluppini'pako mai mipatudukan tangballe angki' ma'tangsalasala (To all the grandmothers who have died, may they be present to guide and instruct us). Cultural memory theory explains that collective memories are not stored personally by individuals, but are maintained through symbols, rites, and languages that are shared (Assmann, 2011; Wahyuni & Jaeka, 2025). In the context of Toraja society, the language of the dead serves as a means of storage and reminder of shared memory, so that those who have died still have a place and role in social life and community identity.

Hermeneutic approaches help to understand this relational narrative as a cultural text that opens up understanding of human relations. From a hermeneutic perspective, language that continues to present the dead can be understood as a way for humans to deal with the disconnection brought about by death. Ricoeur explained that through narratives, humans can maintain the continuity of self-identity and community identity, even when dealing with events that threaten sustainability (Ricoeur, 1981; Nensilanti et al., 2025). In the Toraja language, the narrative of the dead serves to maintain the identity of the community while still including those who have died in the shared story. These findings are in line with contemporary anthropological studies that reject the view that death always means the termination of social relations. In many cultures, death is understood as a change in the form of a relationship, in which the deceased remains symbolically and socially present (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Parry & Bloch, 1982). The Toraja language clearly shows how the change in relations is carried out through linguistic practices that continue to be used and inherited from one generation to the next.

Thus, the relational narrative in the Toraja language confirms that death is still understood as a social event. The deceased is not treated as a passive object of memory, but as a subject who remains in relation to those who are living.

Language is a space where these relationships are maintained, negotiated, and given meaning. This reading strengthens the understanding of death as a living cultural text and forms the basis for further discussion, namely how this relationship is framed through the metaphor of travel and the image of post-death space in the Toraja language.

The Metaphor of Journey in the Narrative of Death

In addition to being understood as a process and relationship, death in the Toraja language (for *Aluk To Dolo* adherents) is also framed through the metaphor of travel. This metaphor appears in various expressions that describe death as the act of leaving, departing, or being ushered into the space of life after death. One example can be found in the expression *samalemalema sau' sauntanganamo lalanna, male tipaepae tombinna tikaladun banderana*, which describes a person who travels farther and farther into the afterlife and departs with the accompaniment of a sacrificed buffalo. This phrase affirms that death is understood as a journey that takes place gradually and is accompanied by the community through rites.

Using the metaphor of journey, the Toraja language does not view death as an end that comes suddenly, but rather as an advanced stage in the journey of human life. This perspective helps the Toraja community, especially *the followers of Aluk To Dolo*, understand death in a more sensible and meaningful way, while placing it within the framework of relationships, hope, and sustainability of life that goes beyond biological death. In the study of cognitive linguistics, metaphors are not understood simply as a language style, but as a basic way of understanding abstract experiences through more concrete and familiar experiences (Lakoff and Johnson, 2008; Suwignyo et al., 2025). Death, as an experience that is difficult to understand directly, is then explained through the experience of travel known in everyday life. In the Toraja language, this mapping allows

death to be understood as a transfer from one living space to another, rather than as a total disconnection from the world of the living. The concept of post-death space like *Puya* further strengthens this metaphor of travel. For the adherents of *Aluk To Dolo*, *Puya* is the spirit world, which is the destination of the spirit of the person who died after death before going to heaven and becoming a god (*to memballi Puang*). Thus, *Puya* is not understood as the final destination, but as a transitional space in the journey of the deceased towards the sky. The language used to describe *Puya* is loaded with descriptions of journey, waiting, and transition. This shows that the Toraja language builds an understanding of life after death gradually and dynamically, in line with the view that human life does not stop at biological death. Thus, the metaphor of travel not only explains where the dead go, but also how they remain understood to be in an ongoing relationship with the living.

The metaphor of travel in the Toraja language of death also has an important social and emotional function. By narrating death as a journey, language provides a framework of meaning that helps families and communities manage grief. Death is not understood as a completely disconnected loss, but rather as a temporary separation in a meaningful journey. Anthropological research on death rituals shows that this kind of metaphor plays an important role in calming communities and maintaining social togetherness in the midst of the experience of loss (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Parry & Bloch, 1982; Zakaria, 2022).

From a hermeneutic perspective, the metaphor of travel opens up an understanding that goes beyond the mere function of language. Ricoeur asserts that metaphors have the ability to bring new meanings by opening up perspectives that were previously unavailable (Nensilanti et al., 2025; Ricoeur, 1981). In the Toraja language, the metaphor of travel allows death to be interpreted as part of a larger life story, rather than as an event

that erases the meaning of life. This metaphor directs the collective imagination of the community to the continuity of life, hope, and the connection between the past, present, and future.

The study of Toraja ritual discourse also shows that the metaphor of travel does not stand alone, but rather merges with ritual speech and symbolic practices. Baan et al. (2022) asserts that the Toraja language of death rituals forms a cosmological view that places death in a network of relationships between humans, ancestors, and the cosmic order. Travel metaphors are one of the main ways to convey these views narratively and symbolically.

Thus, the metaphor of travel in the Toraja death narrative confirms that language not only reflects the way people understand death, but also helps shape that understanding. This metaphor allows death to be understood as a process that is meaningful, relational, and open to hope. This reading strengthens the understanding of the Toraja language as a living cultural text and serves as an important foundation for broader hermeneutic discussions about the meaning of death and its implications for contextual theological reflection.

Hermeneutic Discussion: The Toraja Language and the Horizon Meaning of Death

The findings in the previous section show that the Toraja language about death forms a system of interrelated meanings. Death is understood as a process that takes place gradually, is maintained in social relations, and framed through the metaphor of journey. The hermeneutic discussion in this section aims to explain how the entire linguistic practice shapes the way the Toraja people, especially *the followers of Aluk To Dolo*, understand and interpret death. Language not only reflects a community's outlook on life, but also shapes the way they live and respond to death as a profound life experience.

In the framework of hermeneutics, language is understood as a text that opens up a world of meaning for its readers. Paul Ricoeur

explains that texts, including cultural texts and oral literature, are able to present a world that can be entered and interpreted by readers from different backgrounds (Ricoeur, 1981; Wahid, 2015). When the Toraja language of death is read as a cultural text, it opens up the understanding that death is not seen as an absolute end, but rather as part of a continuous flow of life. This understanding is not fixed, but continues to be formed through the use of language and ritual practices lived by the community.

Hermeneutic readings also show that the meaning of death in the Toraja language was born from the encounter between language and the context of people's lives. The terms death status, relational narrative, and travel metaphor derive their meaning not only from the form of the language, but from the social and cultural situations in which it is used. In contemporary hermeneutics, understanding is always seen as a dialogue between the meaning of the text and the reader's experience (Gadamer, 1992; Kau, 2014). In this context, the Toraja language about death can continue to be read and reinterpreted by the Toraja people today, including in the life of the Christian faith, without having to give up its cultural roots.

Furthermore, hermeneutic readings show that the Toraja language forms a relational and communal understanding of death. Death is not seen as a separate personal experience, but as an event involving a network of social and cosmological relationships. This view is in line with anthropological and linguistic-cultural studies that affirm that in many cultures, death is interpreted collectively and is closely related to the social structure of the community (Irijaya, 2022; Metcalf & Huntington, 1991; Parry & Bloch, 1982). The Toraja language, thus, directs the understanding of death within the framework of relationships, shared memory, and the sustainability of community life.

From the point of view of language hermeneutics, the metaphor of travel that is widely used in the Toraja death narrative has an important

role in shaping this understanding. Ricoeur emphasizes that metaphors not only beautify language, but have the ability to present a new perspective on reality (Ricoeur, 1981; Susanti, 2024). In the Toraja language, the metaphor of travel allows death to be understood as a meaningful transition and open to hope, not as emptiness or meaningless ending. This metaphor helps shape people's collective imagination of the postmortal future.

This hermeneutic discussion also affirms that the Toraja language about death becomes a space of dialogue between tradition and change. In the life of today's Toraja people, who live at the intersection of local culture and the Christian faith, the language of death becomes a place where old meanings are reinterpreted and new meanings are negotiated. The hermeneutic approach allows for readings that do not simplify culture or faith, but open up a critical and reflective dialogue between the two (Bevans, 2002; Sibarani et al., 2025). Therefore, the Toraja language is not understood as a remnant of the past, but rather as a living and continuously spoken cultural text.

By reading the Toraja language about death through a hermeneutic approach, this study shows that the meaning of death does not lie in one specific term or practice, but in the entire narrative built by language. The understanding of death in the Toraja language is open, dialogical, and dynamic. This perspective becomes an important basis for contextual theological reflection that does not depart from a normative assessment of culture, but rather from a serious dialogue with cultural texts as a source of meaning. This section is also a link to the next discussion, namely the contextual theological implications of the Toraja language of death.

Implications of Contextual Theology: Language as a Theological Space

The hermeneutic reading of the Toraja language on death opens up important implications for the development of contextual theology,

especially in understanding how faith is lived and expressed through cultural language. The findings of this study show that the Toraja language not only functions as a means of cultural communication, but also as a space for theological reflection. Through language, understandings of life, death, relationships, and expectations are formed and inherited. Therefore, local language cannot be seen as an additional element in theology, but rather as *a locus theologicus*, that is, a concrete space in which theology is born and develops.

The language of the status of death that delays the determination of death, the relational narrative that maintains the presence of the dead as a social subject, and the metaphor of travel that interprets death as transition, show that the Toraja people understand death in terms of relationships and sustainability. The theological implication of this finding is that the Christian faith in the Toraja context cannot be understood solely as individual and final events. On the contrary, faith needs to be read in a relational and communal framework. Contextual theology, in this case, is called to dialogue with the language of the culture that has already shaped the religious imagination of society (Bevans, 2002).

From a contextual theological perspective, cultural language is not understood as a threat to faith, but rather as an incarnate medium, where faith takes concrete form in everyday life. This approach is in line with the view that theology is born from the encounter between faith texts, human experiences, and certain socio-cultural contexts (Mawikere, 2026). When the Toraja language of death is read hermeneutically, it is seen that the experience of grief and hope always has a theological dimension, as it is expressed through symbols and narratives that are meaningful to the community.

Another important implication is that understanding death as a process and relationship challenges the tendency of normative theology to be too abstract or individualistic. The Toraja language emphasizes that death always involves

community, shared memory, and cross-generational relationships. Within this framework, contextual theology can develop a reflection on death that is more sensitive to social and cultural dimensions, without losing the orientation of the Christian faith. Death is understood not only as the end of biological life, but as a moment of transition that is full of meaning for the community of believers. The dominant metaphor of travel in the Toraja language of death also opens up space for theological reflection on hope. This metaphor has a close affinity with the Christian theological tradition that understands life as pilgrimage and death as a transition to fullness of life. However, rather than imposing theological categories from the outside, the contextual approach allows the metaphor of travel in the Toraja language to be read as a meeting point between cultural experience and reflection of faith. In this case, cultural language serves as a bridge that makes theology able to speak contextually and understandable by the community.

Furthermore, the contextual theological implications of this reading affirm the importance of dialogical hermeneutics in theology. The Toraja language of death does not demand a theological acceptance without reflection, but invites a critical and open dialogue. Hermeneutics allows theology to first listen to cultural voices, then reinterpret faith traditions in the light of the concrete experiences of society (Tjong, 2025). With this approach, theology does not stand on culture, but walks with culture in an ongoing process of meaning.

Thus, the Toraja language about death can be understood as a real space with contextual theology. Language is a means of expressing faith, a medium for processing grief, and a forum for mutual hope. This implication confirms that contextual theology rooted in language and cultural narratives has great potential to present a more grounded, relational, and meaningful reflection of faith for the lives of the Toraja people today.

Discussion Synthesis

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A reading of the Toraja language about death (by *Aluk To Dolo* adherents) shows that death is understood and lived through layered cultural narratives. Language not only mentions the event of death, but shapes the way death is understood as a meaningful process. Death is spoken as a narrative process, maintained in social relations, and framed through a metaphor of a journey rich in symbolic meaning. Overall, these findings confirm that the Toraja language works as a cultural text that forms a shared understanding of life, death, and the sustainability of human relationships.

Linguistically, the terms and expressions of death in the Toraja language indicate that death is not understood as an absolute and individual end. On the contrary, death is interpreted as a communal event that takes place in time. The language of the status of death delays the socially determined death, relational narratives maintain the presence of the dead as social subjects, and the metaphor of travel directs the community's imagination to sustainability and hope. Thus, language functions performatively, since it not only reflects people's views, but also shapes the way they respond to and live death.

From a hermeneutic perspective, the Toraja language about death opens up a horizon of meaning that is dialogical and dynamic. The meaning of death is not tied to one particular term or practice, but is born from the encounter between languages as cultural texts, social contexts, and experiences of today's readers. Hermeneutic readings show that the Toraja language of death has the power to be reinterpreted along with social and religious changes, without having to give up its cultural roots (Arsita, 2023).

This synthesis also affirms an important contribution to the development of contextual theology. The Toraja language on death can be understood as a space for concrete theological reflection, where faith is expressed through cultural experience. Contextual theology does not exist to replace or judge cultural language, but to dialogue

with it critically and reflectively. In this case, the local language serves as an incarnate medium that allows for a more grounded, relational, and relevant reflection of faith to the life of the Toraja people (Karuru et al., 2025).

Thus, this article emphasizes that the study of language and literature, especially the reading of the narrative of death as a cultural text, makes an important contribution not only to the understanding of Toraja culture, but also to the development of contextual theological reflection in Indonesia. The Toraja language about death shows that the meaning of death is always shaped and negotiated through living narratives, relationships, and metaphors. This awareness opens up opportunities for further research on the role of local languages in shaping people's understanding of faith, cultural identity, and social practices.

4. CONCLUSION

This article shows that the Toraja language about death cannot be understood simply as a collection of customary terms or a complement to rites, but rather as a cultural narrative that shapes the way the Toraja people understand, live, and respond to death. Through a language hermeneutic approach, this study emphasizes that the Toraja language functions as a cultural text that stores and transmits people's views on life, social relations, and religious imagination about death.

The results of the analysis show that death in the Toraja language, especially for *Aluk To Dolo* adherents, is understood as a narrative process, not as an event that occurs instantaneously. The language of the status of death delays the socially determined death by calling it *to makula'* or *to mamma'*, relational narratives maintain the presence of the dead as social subjects, and the metaphor of travel frames death as a meaningful transition and is open to hope. This overall linguistic practice shows that death is understood communally, relationally, and dynamically.

The hermeneutic reading of the Toraja language about death also shows that the meaning

of death is not singular or final. This meaning is always open to dialogue and reinterpretation as the social and cultural context changes. Language is a meeting space between traditions, experiences of loss, and the dynamics of today's society. Thus, the Toraja language of death not only reflects the past, but continues to shape the way the Toraja people understand death in the present.

From a contextual theological perspective, these findings confirm that cultural language can serve as a theological space. The Toraja language of death becomes a medium of contextual reflection on faith, where cultural experiences and religious beliefs dialogue with each other critically and reflectively. Contextual theology that departs from language and cultural narratives allows for the formulation of faith that is more grounded, relational, and close to the concrete experience of society.

In closing, this article affirms his contribution to the study of language and literature, especially in understanding the narrative of death as a cultural text, as well as to the development of contextual theology in Indonesia. This research opens up opportunities for further studies of the role of local languages in shaping understanding of death, cultural identity, and religious practices in pluralistic societies.

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