

# Symbolic and Theological Meanings of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi: A Contextual Approach to Christian Religious Education in the Batak Community

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**Abstract:** This study examines *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi*, a sacred cultural symbol of the Batak community which literally means “rice that restores the soul,” often used in traditional rituals as a medium of spiritual healing, blessing, and communal solidarity. The research addresses the growing theological tension and cultural disconnection among Batak Christian youth who are caught between ancestral heritage and the normative teachings of Christianity. The objective of this study is to explore the symbolic and theological meaning of *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi* and to develop a contextual approach for its integration into Christian Religious Education (CRE). Using a qualitative research approach with library research methods and contextual hermeneutic analysis, the study draws on theological literature, cultural anthropology, and scriptural narratives. The findings reveal that *Boras Sipir Ni Tondi* holds profound symbolic meanings aligned with Christian concepts of restoration, spiritual renewal, and divine grace. When interpreted theologically, this symbol can serve as a pedagogical tool to bridge faith and culture, especially through reflective learning models, contextual liturgies, and integrative teaching strategies. The study proposes that by embracing culturally meaningful symbols within the framework of biblical theology, CRE can foster spiritual identity that is both rooted in tradition and transformative in faith. It concludes that a critical and theologically grounded inculturation of local symbols enhances the relevance of Christian education, enabling learners to embody faith that is contextually aware, spiritually alive, and culturally rooted.

**Keywords:** Boras Sipir Ni Tondi, Batak culture, contextual theology, Christian Religious Education, inculturation, spiritual formation

## 1. Introduction

Local cultural wealth is an invaluable heritage that shapes a community's identity, values and worldview. In the context of Batak society, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is a cultural symbol with spiritual value. The term literally means “soul-restoring or strengthening rice”, and is traditionally used in various traditional rituals as a symbol of restoration, purification, and strengthening of the soul (tondi).[1] More than just a customary practice, this symbol represents the relationship between humans, ancestors, and the transcendent, and therefore holds reflective potential in spirituality and faith education.

However, in the practice of contemporary Christian life in Batak communities, there is often a tension between the preservation of local cultural values and theological understandings that are considered pure Christian teachings. Some church circles view symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi with suspicion, as they are associated with pre-Christian belief systems.[1] As a result, a dichotomy emerges: on the one hand, rejection of local cultural elements because they are considered unbiblical; on the other hand, blind acceptance without mature theological reasoning. This tension has resulted in an identity crisis, especially among the younger generation of Batak Christians, who feel uprooted from their ancestral cultural roots as they grow in faith.

This issue is even more complex in the current era of globalization and digitalization, where the younger generation of Batak Christians not only struggle with the duality between ancestral culture and church teachings, but are also exposed to new values that tend to be individualistic and secular. In the midst of social media and instant information, many of them

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experience confusion in forming a complete spiritual and cultural identity. According to Guntur, when the church is unable to provide a healthy and open dialogue space between faith and culture, then what emerges is apathy towards both: faith is considered rigid and irrelevant, while culture is seen as an obsolete relic of the past.[2] This situation demands a more reflective and contextual approach from the church, so that Christian values can be lived without ignoring the richness of local culture which is actually also a gift from God.

In the context of Christian Religious Education (PAK), this reality challenges educators to develop an approach that is not only dogmatic-normative, but also contextual and transformative. Anita asserts that faith education that does not consider the local cultural context often loses its reach, vitality, and existential meaning for students.[3] A contextual approach that integrates with local values not only enriches the understanding of faith, but also opens space for a healthy dialogue between Christianity and cultural wisdom. One important strategy in this regard is to integrate cultural symbols, such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi, into the development of PAK pedagogical materials and approaches.

Previous studies have made important contributions in uncovering the symbolic meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in Batak tradition. D. Simanjuntak, through his ethnographic study, emphasizes that Boras acts as a medium of spiritual healing in various life events such as birth, marriage, and mourning, which strengthens the solidarity of the Toba Batak community.[3] Hutapea in his study notes how this symbol has begun to be questioned by modern church circles, especially in the context of urbanization and modernization, which makes the younger generation of Bataks increasingly distant from their cultural roots. [4] On the other hand, Hotman Naibaho, shows that rice and ulos are not only part of traditional rites, but also full of philosophical values of Dalihan Na Tolu that emphasize the balance of social and spiritual relations. [1] These three studies have successfully highlighted the role of culture and religious tensions in Batak traditional symbols, but have not specifically touched on how these symbols can be used pedagogically in Christian religious education. Therefore, this research is here to fill that space by exploring how Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be contextually integrated into Christian Religious Education (CHE) practices, thus strengthening Batak learners' connection to the Christian faith and their cultural heritage simultaneously.

Based on the background and research gaps outlined earlier, this research is directed at answering two main questions. First, what is the symbolic and theological meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in the perspective of Christian faith? Second, how can this symbol be contextually integrated into the practice of Christian Religious Education in the Batak community? These two problem formulations become the foundation in exploring the relationship between local culture and Christian faith in a reflective and relevant manner.

The purpose of this research is to explore and deeply analyze the symbolic and theological meanings of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi, as well as to develop an integrative contextual approach in Christian Religious Education based on these cultural symbols. This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, which aims to explore and analyze the symbolic and theological meanings of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi and its potential integration in Christian Religious Education (PAK) contextually.[5]

This research contributes to the development of a contextualized Christian Religious Education paradigm, namely education that is not only rooted in the values of Christian faith but also appreciates and lives the richness of local culture critically and theologically. The novelty of this study lies in the offer of integration of local cultural symbols into PAK through a reflective and deep theological approach, not merely affirmative or accommodating to culture. Thus, this study opens space for the renewal of learning models that unite Christian spirituality, local wisdom, and the needs of today's learners as a whole and relevant.

## 2. Proposed Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, which aims to explore and deeply analyze the symbolic and theological meanings of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi and its potential integration into the context of Christian Religious Education in the Batak community. The qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of this research lies on understanding the meanings, values, and cultural symbols within the theological framework and context of faith education.[6] This method emphasizes in-depth interpretation of textual data and symbols derived from local culture and theological literature, thus enabling researchers to understand how the symbols are understood and can be reinterpreted in the light of the Gospel.

In doing so, data was collected through a review of relevant literature sources, such as books on Batak cultural anthropology, contextual theology literature, academic journals, ecclesiastical documents, and the Bible as the main source of Christian faith. The data were then analyzed using a contextual hermeneutic approach, namely reading cultural symbols in the light of biblical narratives and the principles of Christian theology.[7] The focus of the analysis was directed at two main aspects: first, exploring the meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in Batak cosmology and Christian theology; second, the pedagogical integration strategy of this symbol in PAK learning practices. The results of the analysis are descriptive-reflective, so it is expected to produce a new understanding that is contextual and relevant for the development of Christian Religious Education in the Batak cultural environment.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Symbolic Meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in Batak Culture

Etymologically, the term Boras Sipir Ni Tondi comes from the Batak language, which consists of three main words: boras meaning “rice”, sipir meaning “restorer” or “strengthened”, and tondi meaning “soul” or ‘spirit’.[8] Thus, literally Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be interpreted as “rice that restores or strengthens the soul” or “rice that strengthens the spirit”. This ritual has been going on since the past as a form of prayer and hope that someone, whether they are sick, facing difficulties, or a newborn child, is given the strength of the soul (tondi) and the blessing of life. The word tondi refers to the spiritual element in humans that is believed to be the center of life and inner strength. Meanwhile, sipir indicates the function of the rice as a means of spiritual healing or strengthening.”[8]

In Batak society, tondi is understood as the element of life that gives life force and spiritual balance. According to Aries, tondi is not only regarded as the spirit or soul, but as the essential force that enables a person to live a full life physically and spiritually.[9] If tondi is disturbed, uprooted, or weakened due to illness, fear, or spiritual disturbance, then a person is believed to lose their zest for life, fall ill, or experience imbalance in their life. This understanding reflects the Batak people's holistic view of human beings as an inseparable unity of body, soul and spirituality, all of which influence each other and must be maintained in harmony.

The ceremony usually involves rice being sprinkled or touched to the body of the person being prayed for, accompanied by prayers and a series of other symbols. Rice in this tradition is not just a staple food, but a symbol of life, fertility and spiritual strength. In Batak philosophy, rice has a very deep meaning because it is considered a tangible manifestation of God's blessings and the result of human hard work that is guarded by divine power.[9] When rice is used in the Boras Sipir ni Tondi rite, it functions as a medium of connection between humans and tondi (spirits), as well as a means of restoring or strengthening one's spirit. Rice in this ritual is not just food, but a symbol of inner strengthening so that a person remains steadfast in facing the various phases and pressures of life. Similar to Hotman, this term describes the belief that rice, as a symbol of blessing and life, has the symbolic power to restore tondi that is disturbed or weakened, either due to psychic pressure, illness, or spiritual disturbance.”[1]

This practice is generally carried out in important moments such as marriage, baptism, moving house, recovering from trauma or disaster, and when the family experiences grief. Angeli argues that this ritual should only be performed by the huluhula or female parent (tulang/hula-hula) who has the customary authority to bless the family. This action is believed to call back spirits that are ‘scattered’ due to fear or pressure, as well as strengthen the soul so that it remains united with the body.[10] This practice is in line with the philosophy of Dalihan Na Tolu and traditional symbols such as ulos, which together sustain the social and spiritual order of Batak society.[10] Thus, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is not only a cultural heritage, but also part of efforts to maintain mental health and social relations in the Batak community.

The Boras Sipir ni Tondi ritual in Batak culture serves not only as a personal healing ceremony, but also as a spiritual act that maintains the balance of the cosmos. Darwin explains that in the Batak cosmological view, the universe consists of three interconnected layers: the upper world (banua ginjang), the middle world (banua tonga), and the lower world (banua toru). Banua ginjang (upper world), where Debata (God) and holy spirits live; banua tonga (middle world), where humans live and perform their duties; and banua toru (lower world), which is often associated with spirits and supernatural powers.[11] These

three layers are believed to be interconnected and must be kept in balance for life to run harmoniously. When the balance between the body and tondi is disturbed, it is believed to disrupt harmony in the cosmic order. The Boras Sipir ni Tondi ritual acts as a spiritual bridge connecting these three dimensions. When a person's tondi is considered to be disturbed or uprooted, it is not just a personal problem, but rather a disruption to the harmony between the human world and the spirit world.[11] So by using natural elements such as rice (a symbol of life) and prayers to Debata and ancestral spirits, this ritual serves to return the tondi to its place and simultaneously restore cosmic balance according to the Batak belief system.

In practice, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is used in various traditional rites such as welcoming, healing, departure, and affirming one's identity in the family and community. This symbol is usually sprinkled on a person's head as a sign of blessing, restoration, and new life force, which is believed to be able to revive a weak or disturbed spirit (tondi).[8] Anthropologically, this action shows the Batak people's belief that human life is not only physical, but also closely related to spiritual elements and spiritual balance.

The main purpose of using Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is to restore and strengthen the spirit or soul of a person who is considered weakened due to illness, sadness, or spiritual disturbance. In Roster's view, a weak tondi (soul) can affect one's physical and social condition, so spiritual restoration is very important. The ceremony of using boras sipir ni tondi also aims to strengthen family and social relations, as it is conducted in a sacred and collective setting.[12] Thus, the practice not only functions spiritually, but also has a strong social and relational dimension, as a form of community concern and solidarity towards individuals who are in the process of recovering or strengthening their lives.

Symbolically, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi has a rich and deep meaning. It symbolizes blessing, holiness, healing, and renewal of life. Rice as a natural element becomes a medium for restoring the soul, as well as a symbol of divine love and protection in daily life.[13] The act of sprinkling rice on one's head is not just an empty ritual, but a collective statement of faith in a higher power that restores and sustains life. In the context of Batak culture that upholds spirituality and harmonious relations between humans, nature, and the Divine, this symbol becomes a tangible manifestation of the belief that human life is a gift that must be preserved intact, physically, socially, and spiritually.

Boras Sipir Ni Tondi contains various cultural values that reflect the Batak people's view of life regarding the balance between body, soul and social relations. The main values contained in this symbol are restoration, purity, blessing, and communal solidarity. Restoration (sipir) reflects the belief that humans can be restored spiritually and emotionally through symbolic actions that are spiritual in nature. Sanctity is reflected in the use of rice as a natural element that is clean and considered sacred, to signify the presence of a healing and protective force.[13] The value of blessings and the hope of a new life is also seen in the practice of sowing rice, which is believed to bring good luck and renew one's spirit. This practice is not only individual, but also reflects communal values, as it is done within the bonds of kinship and indigenous community showing collective support and love.

By sprinkling rice over one's head, the community symbolically "calls back" the life force and entrusts the individual to the protection of divine spirits or the spiritual power of ancestors. This symbol is also used in important events such as welcoming guests, departing people who are about to migrate, or in weddings, to signify blessings and safety." [8] Thus, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is a multifunctional symbol that contains spiritual, social, and cultural values, which represent the way Batak people interpret life holistically.

In daily life, although not always performed in the form of formal ceremonies, the values contained in Boras Sipir Ni Tondi live on in the Batak community's perspective on health, relationships and spirituality. When someone falls ill, loses their zest for life, or faces a crisis, family or traditional leaders sometimes suggest a small ceremony involving boras sipir as a form of care and inner healing. This confirms that this symbol does not only belong to the big indigenous world, but is also integrated into the collective and spiritual consciousness of everyday people. Through this practice, Batak people show that human life requires a balance between the outer and inner aspects, and Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is a tangible manifestation of efforts to maintain this balance in all aspects of life[1].

Based on the above explanation, Boras Sipir ni Tondi can be understood as a medium of blessing that flows from the divine dimension to humans through sacred symbols and rites. In the framework of Batak cosmology, blessings are not just material or physical healing, but rather a complete connection between humans and Debata, ancestors, nature, and themselves. Through symbolic acts such as the sowing or touching of rice, which

symbolizes life and crops, Bataks believe they are receiving back lost tondi, as well as gaining new blessings and strength from spiritual forces. Thus, Boras Sipir ni Tondi is not only a means of restoration, but also a statement of faith and a request for blessings so that life continues to run in balance, peace and harmony with divine will.

### 3.2. Theological Perspective on the Symbol of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi

From a theological perspective, the Boras Sipir Ni Tondi symbol can be understood as a form of media for divine restoration, healing, and blessing, which is actually part of God's salvation work in human life. Although the roots of this symbol come from traditional Batak culture and are often associated with ancestral beliefs, the values it contains, such as strengthening the soul, restoring the spirit of life, and hope for the future, are in harmony with the principles of Christian faith. According to Among, Christian theology recognizes the concept of restoration and renewal of life through the work of the Holy Spirit who strengthens and restores humans spiritually.[14] In this light, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be interpreted contextually as a symbol that reflects the human longing for the presence and power of God who heals, restores, and revives the weak spirit of life.

This theological argument is based on the inculturation approach, a method in contextual theology that seeks to bridge Christian faith with local culture in a critical and reflective manner. Inculturation does not mean rawly accepting all cultural symbols, but examining and redefining them in the light of the Gospel." [14] Boras Sipir Ni Tondi, when interpreted within the framework of Christian theology, can be seen as a local expression of God's restorative work, as Jesus heals the sick, restores the outcast, and gives new life. Thus, this symbol can be a means of faith reflection in Christian Religious Education, so that learners not only understand Christian teachings in the abstract, but also experience and live them in their own cultural reality. This approach enriches the understanding of faith and opens a space for a deep encounter between cultural traditions and divine revelation.

In the light of Christian theology, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be interpreted as a symbol of human longing for restoration and wholeness of life that can only be fulfilled by God. Rice as the main element in this symbol represents life and providence, which in the Bible is often associated with God's blessings upon His people. As in the story of the provision of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16) or the multiplication of bread by Jesus (Matthew 14:13-21), food symbolizes God's presence and providence over his people as a whole, both physically and spiritually." [15] Therefore, when boras is used to restore the tondi (soul), it can be interpreted as a local representation of God's restorative work that touches the totality of human life. This shows that the need for inner healing and spiritual strength is not alien to the Christian faith, but rather an integral part of the mission of Jesus Christ.

The theological meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can also be linked to the Christian understanding of shalom, which is a state of peace, wholeness and harmony between humans, God, others and nature. In this context, the restoration of tondi means not only the healing of personal weaknesses, but also the renewal of broken relationships and the strengthening of communities. This is in line with the biblical teaching about the restoration done by Christ not only individually but also communally, as stated in 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 that "whoever is in Christ is a new creation... and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation." [16] Thus, the symbol of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be understood as a local form of the ministry of reconciliation, where the community plays an active role in bringing spiritual restoration to its members who experience weakness or suffering.

Thus, from the perspective of Christian theology, the Boras Sipir Ni Tondi symbol is not only culturally relevant, but can also be enriched and given new meaning through an understanding of the Gospel. This symbol can be a means of faith inculturation that shows that God works in and through culture to reveal His love and restoration. God is present in human history and culture through Christ." [16] Therefore, this symbol does not need to be erased or avoided in faith education, but rather theologically and critically reinterpreted so that it can become a bridge that connects Christian faith with the spiritual experience of the Batak people. This process allows for a deeper, more grounded and contextualized appreciation of faith, and forms learners who are able to recognize God's work in their own history and culture.

In spiritual life, this concept of tondi can be aligned with the Christian understanding of the human spirit or soul that requires nurturing from God. The Bible talks a lot about the importance of strengthening and restoring the human spirit, as it says in Psalm 23:3, "He refreshes my soul." A fresh and alive spirit or soul is a sign of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit." [17] Thus, within the framework of Christian theology, the Boras Sipir Ni Tondi symbol can be interpreted as a sign of human longing for spiritual refreshment, which in the Christian faith is realized through the saving work of Jesus Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The relationship between this symbol and the tondi opens a space for reflection that spiritual needs are universal, and local cultures express them in unique ways but can still be understood and affirmed in the light of the Gospel.

This relationship shows that spiritual life in Batak society is inseparable from collective values and communal symbolic actions. The restoration of tondi is not an individualistic act, but involves the community being present to pray, support and express love in a tangible way through symbolic rituals. This is parallel to the Christian principle that emphasizes the importance of the fellowship of the body of Christ as a place of spiritual growth and restoration (cf. Galatians 6:2; James 5:16). [17] Therefore, the symbol of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be a meeting point between cultural practices and Christian spirituality that prioritizes the restoration of the soul in the context of healthy relationships with God and others. This confirms that in an effort to foster a full spiritual life, the recognition of local values that are in harmony with the Gospel is important as part of the formation of a contextual and grounded faith.

From a theological perspective, Boras Sipir ni Tondi can be viewed as a cultural symbol that reflects the Batak people's spiritual longing for restoration, wholeness and divine blessings. The ritual demonstrates a deep awareness of the human need to live in balance between body and spirit, as well as a harmonious relationship with God, others and the universe. Although derived from ancestral traditions, the spiritual meanings behind the rice symbols and prayers in Boras Sipir ni Tondi show universal values that are in line with the Christian faith, such as life restoration, community fellowship, and the revelation of God's love in daily life. In the light of the Gospel, the rice symbol in this ritual can be reinterpreted as a symbol of God's grace that nurtures and strengthens His people." [12]

With the strengthening of contextual theological understanding, Boras Sipir ni Tondi can be reflected as a form of local faith expression that reflects the search for a God who heals and blesses. The church can take an active role in reinterpreting these cultural symbols critically and redemptively, so that the noble values in the Batak tradition are not lost, but instead enriched by the light of Christ. Thus, the Boras Sipir ni Tondi symbol becomes a bridge between Christian faith and the deep Batak cultural heritage, without losing the truth of the gospel which is the foundation of faith.

### 3.3. Inculturation and Integration Strategies in Learning Practices

The strategy of inculturation and integration in learning practices, especially in Christian Religious Education, is a pedagogical and theological approach that seeks to connect Christian faith with the local cultural context in a deep and relevant manner. In the context of Batak society, this strategy is important because the Christian faith does not exist in an empty space, but in the midst of a cultural heritage rich in symbolic and spiritual meanings, such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi. The inculturative approach aims to recognize cultural values that are in line with Christian teachings, then critically integrate them into the learning process so that learners can experience an authentic encounter between faith and daily life." [18]

Inculturation in learning does not mean equating faith with culture, but finding common ground where cultural values can be a bridge to a deeper understanding of God and His work in human history. With this strategy, symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi can be used as contextual teaching materials to discuss themes of restoration, blessing, or God's presence in human life. The integration strategy then involves a pedagogical process where teachers relate cultural symbols to Biblical narratives, Christian doctrines, as well as learners' personal reflections. [18] This not only enriches theological understanding, but also forms a contextualized, grounded, and more meaningful faith identity for learners living in the Batak cultural reality.

Through this strategy, CRE learning becomes more dialogical and reflective, as learners are invited to see that God is also at work in their history and culture. Sundoro argues that

inculturation also encourages learners to develop a critical and theological attitude in interpreting traditional symbols.[19] Thus, learning practices are not only oriented towards the transfer of theological knowledge, but also towards the formation of spirituality, cultural identity, and mission awareness in their own context. This strategy becomes important in education that respects plurality, upholds local values, and remains rooted in the truth of the Gospel.

The application of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in PAK learning can be done through a contextual hermeneutical approach, where learners are invited to interpret local cultural symbols in the light of biblical narratives. For example, in the material on “God who restores and revives human souls”, teachers can start with a case study or discussion about the meaning and practice of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in the Batak tradition. Afterwards, students are invited to examine biblical texts such as Psalm 23:3 (“He refreshes my soul”) or Mark 5:34 (Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace, and be healed of your disease”).[20] This approach emphasizes the understanding that spiritual restoration (tondi) is part of God's saving work, and that cultural symbols can be an entry point to understanding broader theological truths.

In addition, learning can be directed into a project-based learning model that assigns learners to prepare a presentation or portfolio on the theological meaning of the Boras Sipir Ni Tondi symbol. In small groups, students can identify the values contained in it (such as restoration, hope and solidarity) and compare them with the values in the Gospel. They then develop a learning tool or faith reflection based on local culture that can be used to teach younger siblings in the classroom or church community. This strategy strengthens learners' theological, social, and creative skills, while making PAK learning a means of real service.”[21]

Another approach that can be applied is spiritual and cultural reflection-based learning. Teachers can develop a faith reflection journal in which students write down their experiences of feeling demoralized or spiritually distressed (weak tondi), and how they experience recovery through faith in God or community support. In the journal, students are invited to see parallels between their experiences, the gospel message, and the meaning of the Boras Sipir Ni Tondi symbol. This is in line with the pedagogical principle of PAK that emphasizes the formation of personal spirituality in relationship with God, others, and culture.”[21]

Thus, the application of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in PAK learning can be done through liturgy or symbolic practices in a Christian education environment, such as spiritual retreats or faith formation services. For example, in recovery sessions or intercessory prayers, teachers or coaches can use rice as a visual symbol of inner recovery, not in a mystical sense, but as a means of symbolic appreciation that God blesses and restores His people as a whole. This activity helps learners internalize the values of faith through symbolic actions that are familiar and meaningful. With this approach, PAK becomes a space where local culture is not only learned, but interpreted and renewed in the light of Christ in a concrete and liberating way.

The application of the symbolic meaning of Boras Sipir Ni Tondi in spiritual life and PAK learning does not have to be exclusively done by hula-hula (the blessing giver in Batak custom), but can be done by anyone who has an awareness of the importance of spiritual recovery and strengthening. Culturally, it is true that in the Batak traditional structure the role of hula-hula is highly respected and has authority in the implementation of traditional rites, including the giving of boras sipir ni tondi.[10] However, if this symbol is seen in the light of Christian faith, its meaning can be expanded and interpreted as an act of faith that affirms that anyone can be a channel of blessing and restoration for others. Every believer is called to bring restoration to others through prayer, service, care, and strengthening of the soul based on the love of Christ.

In the context of Christian Religious Education, this becomes the pedagogical basis for teaching learners that spiritual healing is not limited to traditional structures or certain groups, but is the calling of all believers. In the classroom, students are invited to understand that symbolic actions such as boras sipir ni tondi can be reinterpreted as a form of service of love, care and spiritual strengthening that can be done by anyone who wants to be God's instrument. This affirms the principle of the priesthood of believers in Christian theology, that every believer has a role in reconciling, restoring, and building up his or her neighbor.[22] Thus, the practice of restoration in this local context can be lived out more

inclusively and relevantly by the entire Christian community, not only as a cultural heritage, but as an active and contextual expression of faith.

Based on the above explanation, inculturation and integration strategies in learning practices are important approaches to build contextual, relevant and meaningful learning, especially in Christian religious education in a society rich in local culture such as Batak. Through inculturation, cultural values are theologically processed to be in harmony with the teachings of the Christian faith, while integration allows the unification of students' understanding of faith and cultural experience in a unified whole. This approach not only strengthens students' cultural identity, but also deepens the appreciation of a living and grounded faith. Thus, this strategy is an effective means of forming a generation that is able to dialogue with its culture critically, but remains firm in Christian values.

### 3.4. Theological Challenges and Ethics in the Use of Cultural Symbols

The use of local cultural symbols in Christian Religious Education (CRE) brings many positive potentials, especially in grounding faith in the midst of students' real lives. However, the application of symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi also has challenges and requires theological caution. One of the main challenges is the line between Christian reinterpretation and the possibility of syncretism, i.e. mixing Christian teachings with unbiblical beliefs or practices. This can happen when symbols are used without a deep explanation of the difference as pedagogical aids, rather than as spiritual tools in a magical sense." [23] It is therefore important for educators to have a strong theological understanding and sensitivity to both the original meaning and the new meaning to be conveyed.

In the context of education, the limitation of its use lies in the function of the symbol: it should not be interpreted as a means of salvation or divine power in itself, but only as a means of illustration or reflection of faith. In PAK, cultural symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi should be clearly positioned as part of the narrative and not a substitute for sacraments or core doctrines of the Christian faith. PAK teachers need to emphasize that true healing comes from God, and local symbols are only a medium of communication that helps learners understand God's work contextually. Otherwise, there is a risk that learners perceive cultural symbols as an obligatory part or as a religious practice that equals the role of the ecclesiastical liturgy." [24]

Just as Holy Communion uses bread and wine as symbols of the body and blood of Christ, Boras Sipir ni Tondi in the Batak cultural context also uses the symbolic element of rice to convey a deep spiritual meaning, namely the restoration and reunification of body and spirit. [25] In Holy Communion, the physical element becomes a means of faith encounter that connects humans with the saving grace of Christ; similarly in Boras Sipir ni Tondi, rice becomes a medium to express the longing for the wholeness of a blessed life. When interpreted theologically in the light of the Gospel, the symbol of Boras Sipir ni Tondi can be a learning tool that helps learners understand that God is present in everyday life, including through cultural symbols that are interpreted correctly. So, just as Holy Communion is not just a rite, but a statement of faith and fellowship, so too can local cultural practices become a contextualized and meaningful bridge of faith if guided by the light of God's word.

Another challenge that needs to be faced is resistance from those who hold exclusive or puritanical theological understandings, who view any form of inculturation as a threat to the purity of faith. In this case, the theological ethics that must be maintained are the principles of prudence, openness to dialogue, and respect for the church's beliefs. [26] Teachers or Christian leaders who use cultural symbols must be able to provide strong theological arguments and explain the biblical basis and pastoral purpose of the approach. Theological ethics demand integrity in teaching, where teachers not only pursue relevance, but also ensure that any form of inculturation remains faithful to the heart of the gospel.

Finally, education that uses cultural symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi must operate within a framework of critical dialogue between faith and culture. Healthy boundaries do not mean rejecting local culture, but giving it a place in a selective and transformative way. Contextualized PAK needs to shape learners to be able to appreciate their cultural heritage, but also be equipped with the ability to assess and filter these values in the light of Christ. Thus, theological ethics in religious education not only safeguards true teachings, but also

opens up space for faith growth that is contextual, dynamic, and remains rooted in the truth of the Gospel.

As Jesus did in His ministry, He often used certain media or symbols, such as clay to heal the blind (John 9:6) or His cloak being touched by a woman with a hemorrhage (Mark 5:28-29), not because they had magical powers, but as a means that led to the experience of faith and spiritual healing.[27] Similarly, in Christian Religious Education, the use of cultural symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi should be seen as a pedagogical medium that helps learners understand the meaning of healing, love, and God's presence in their cultural context. The most important thing is not the physical elements, but the spiritual message conveyed, namely that God works visibly in human life, even through familiar and meaningful local symbols, as long as they are used in a theologically sound manner and do not replace the core of the Christian faith.

### **3.5. Theological and Educational Implications for Learners' Faith Understanding**

Understanding cultural symbols such as Boras Sipir ni Tondi has significant theological and educational implications for learners' faith formation, especially in the context of Christian Religious Education (CHE) in the Batak community. When local cultural symbols are theologically interpreted and integrated in the learning process, learners are not only helped to understand Christian values theoretically, but also invited to live their faith in a complete relationship with their own cultural identity. This approach helps them see that Christian faith is not alien to culture, but is able to be present, grow, and give meaning within it.[28] Thus, the process of faith education becomes more contextual, relevant, and down-to-earth, and forms a person who is spiritually strong and aware of local values that have been transformed by the Gospel.

This implication also challenges Christian educators to be facilitators who not only convey doctrine, but also build bridges between divine revelation and learners' cultural experiences. By critically and reflectively presenting symbols such as Boras Sipir ni Tondi in the classroom, teachers open a space for a lively dialogue of faith, where learners can ask questions, evaluate and deepen their beliefs through a familiar cultural lens. This process reinforces the realization that the Christian faith is not just an external heritage, but can address and renew their daily lives.“[29] This educational implication results in learners who not only know ”what they believe,“ but also ”why they believe,“ and how to live out that faith in their cultural context responsibly and faithfully to Christ.

Contextualization has a profound impact on the meaning of faith because it allows individuals to understand and live Christian teachings within the framework of their own culture and life experiences. In the context of Batak society, for example, the meaning of symbols such as Boras Sipir ni Tondi interpreted theologically can bridge between ancestral cultural heritage and evangelical values, so that faith does not feel foreign or detached from everyday reality. According to Muhaimin, when learners see that the Christian faith can speak in the language and symbols they are familiar with, they will more easily grasp the relevance of the gospel in their lives.[30] This strengthens a faith identity that is not only personal, but also communal, and encourages the creation of a generation that believes in Christ with strong roots in its own culture, yet remains open to transformation by the truth of God's word.

The implications of contextualization for the meaning of faith can be seen when a Christian Religious Education teacher in a Batak community invited students to discuss Boras Sipir ni Tondi in relation to the teachings on restoration and blessing in the Bible. In a class discussion, the teacher connected the symbol of rice as a symbol of life with John 10:10, where Jesus came to give abundant life. Students were then asked to recount their experiences of seeing or being involved in the ritual in their families, and reflect on its spiritual meaning in the light of Christian faith.[31] As a result, students not only understood the teachings on restoration theoretically, but also saw how these values had been present in their culture, and were now deepened by the truth of the gospel. This makes their faith feel closer, more alive and grounded, not just as a school subject, but as a meaningful part of everyday life.

The implications of this understanding also affect the construction of Christian identity in Batak culture is an integrative process that forms a strong awareness of faith without letting go of cultural roots. Learners are taught that being a Batak Christian does not mean abandoning traditional values, but rather purifying them in the light of the Gospel. Noble

values such as respect for parents (elek marboru), extended family solidarity (dalihan na tolu), and the spirit of mutual cooperation can be understood as a reflection of love and togetherness in the body of Christ.[11] For example, when students are invited to understand that giving tudu-tudu sipanganon (symbolic food) in traditional events can be combined with the concept of service and communion of love, they begin to see that Christian faith does not conflict with culture, but rather enriches and sanctifies it. As a result, students grow up with a full Christian identity and they do not feel uprooted from their cultural roots, but instead are more proud to be Batak people who live in the love of Christ.

Preserving traditions such as Boras Sipir ni Tondi that are theologically interpreted not only preserves the cultural heritage of the ancestors, but also strengthens the spirit of the community in seeking the word of God and deepening Christian values in the midst of a modern world that tends to be individualistic and materialistic. This tradition, when lived out in the light of faith, becomes a means to foster social solidarity, strengthen relationships between community members, and create a collective and constructive spiritual space.[11] In this context, cultural heritage is not merely preserved as a symbol of the past, but becomes a part of life that is constantly renewed by the truth of the gospel, so that the community is not uprooted from its cultural roots, but is stronger in facing the challenges of the times with contextualized faith and a solid community.

In conclusion, the reinterpretation of Boras Sipir ni Tondi in the light of Christian faith shows that local cultural symbols can be an effective bridge to deepen faith understanding while contextually preserving ancestral heritage. Through thoughtful integration in Christian Religious Education, these symbols not only enrich learners' spiritual experience, but also strengthen cultural identity, social solidarity and communal attachment in Batak society. Thus, Christian faith can grow in a relevant and down-to-earth manner without losing its core truth, and be able to answer the challenges of modern times with strong cultural roots and vibrant spirituality.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Based on the description that has been presented, it can be concluded that Boras Sipir Ni Tondi is a Batak cultural symbol rich in spiritual and social meaning, which in the light of Christian theology can be interpreted as a means of healing, strengthening the soul, and expressing collective faith. This symbol reflects the human longing for the wholeness of a blessed life, as well as God's providence that is present in real life through familiar and meaningful cultural elements. The right inculturation and integration approach in Christian Religious Education opens up space for learners to understand that Christian faith does not have to be in conflict with ancestral culture, but instead can be integrated critically and reflectively to form a living, grounded and meaningful faith. Symbols such as Boras Sipir Ni Tondi serve as a bridge between cultural identity and Christian spirituality, connecting young people to their cultural roots while affirming their faith in Christ.

The implication of this approach is very important in the process of faith education, as it allows learners to experience authentic faith encounters in their own cultural context. Pedagogical strategies such as theological discussions, spiritual reflections, to contextualized liturgies help learners not only understand doctrines, but also live out evangelical values in their daily life experiences. Thus, Boras Sipir Ni Tondi does not only function as a traditional heritage, but also as an educative and theological medium that enriches the process of forming a complete faith—a critical, contextual, and transformative faith. Churches and Christian educators are challenged to continue to open space for cultural symbols to be reinterpreted in a healthy manner, so that the younger generation is not uprooted from their cultural roots, but rather grows as individuals with strong faith, wisdom, and relevance in the modern world.

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