

# WATER SYMBOLISM IN JOHN AND MARTUTU AEK: A BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL READING OF RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

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Received: 30-06-2025 | Revised: 29-04-2026 | Accepted: 30-06-2026

## ABSTRACT

This article examines water symbolism in the Gospel of John and the *Martutu Aek* ritual as two forms of religious literature, namely, a canonical written text and an oral performative ritual text. Previous studies have separately analyzed Johannine water imagery through textual-exegetical lenses and the *Martutu Aek* through ethnographic-cultural frameworks, leaving largely unexplored the systematic comparison of these traditions through a unified analytical framework. This study aims to compare how water symbolism is constructed and interpreted in both traditions through a biblical-theological and hermeneutic-comparative approach. Employing a qualitative hermeneutical approach, the study analyzes John 3:1–21 and 4:1–42 as primary textual data and scholarly documented ethnographic sources of the *Martutu Aek* ritual as secondary data, using six structured deductive categories. The findings reveal functional convergences, as both traditions employ water as a sacred medium for rites of initiation, spiritual purification, and the reconstruction of communal identity. A fundamental theological divergence nevertheless emerges: the Johannine narrative directs water symbolism toward an eschatological-transcendental transformation for eternal life, whereas the *Martutu Aek* ritual emphasizes a restorative-immanent transformation to reestablish socio-cosmic harmony. This article contributes to religious literature studies in the Nusantara by demonstrating how a biblical-theological reading can engage seriously with oral ritual traditions, demonstrating that oral ritual traditions warrant the same analytical rigor as canonical written texts, while also offering implications for contextual theological reflection and ecological awareness in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *Gospel of John; Martutu Aek; Religious Literature; Water Symbolism; Biblical Theology.*

**ABSTRAK**

*Artikel ini mengkaji simbolisme air dalam Injil Yohanes dan ritual Martutu Aek sebagai dua bentuk sastra keagamaan, yaitu teks kanonik tertulis dan teks ritual lisan yang bersifat performatif. Penelitian sebelumnya telah menganalisis citra air dalam Yohanes melalui lensa tekstual-eksegetis dan Martutu Aek melalui kerangka etnografi-kultural secara terpisah, sehingga perbandingan sistematis antara kedua tradisi sastra keagamaan ini masih jarang dilakukan. Penelitian ini bertujuan membandingkan bagaimana simbolisme air dikonstruksi dan ditafsirkan dalam kedua tradisi melalui lensa analitis biblikal-teologis dan hermeneutik-komparatif. Dengan pendekatan kualitatif hermeneutik, penelitian ini menganalisis Yohanes 3:1–21 dan 4:1–42 sebagai data tekstual primer, serta sumber-sumber etnografi terdokumentasi tentang ritual Martutu Aek sebagai data sekunder, dengan menggunakan enam kategori deduktif terstruktur. Temuan menunjukkan adanya konvergensi fungsional, di mana kedua tradisi menggunakan air sebagai media sakral untuk ritus inisiasi, penyucian spiritual, dan rekonstruksi identitas komunal. Perbedaan teologis fundamental tetap muncul: narasi Yohanes mengarahkan simbolisme air pada transformasi eskatologis-transendental menuju kehidupan kekal, sedangkan ritual Martutu Aek menekankan transformasi restoratif-imanen untuk memulihkan keharmonisan sosial-kosmik. Artikel ini memberikan kontribusi bagi studi sastra keagamaan Nusantara dengan menunjukkan bagaimana pembacaan biblikal-teologis dapat berdialog secara serius dengan tradisi ritual lisan, sekaligus menawarkan implikasi bagi refleksi teologis kontekstual dan kesadaran ekologis di Indonesia.*

**Kata kunci:** Injil Yohanes; Martutu Aek; Literatur Keagamaan; Simbol Air; Teologi Biblika.

## INTRODUCTION

Water constitutes one of the most pervasive and profound motifs in religious literature across civilizations, functioning not merely as a material element essential to biological existence, but as a symbolic medium that conveys purification, transition, and the encounter between humanity and the divine.<sup>1</sup> In diverse

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<sup>1</sup>Jyoti Sahi, "The Open Well as Symbol of the Meeting of Heaven and Earth," *Religions* 13, no. 2 (January 21, 2022): 103, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020103>. cf. Maogui Zheng and Markus Budiraharjo, "The Symbolism Of Water In The Gospel Of John," *Paramasastra* 11, no. 2 (September 30, 2024): 242–56, <https://doi.org/10.26740/paramasastra.v11n2.p242-256>.

religious literary traditions, from the primeval waters of chaos in Mesopotamian epics to the purifying rivers in Hindu and Buddhist narratives, water consistently marks the boundary between the profane and the sacred, while simultaneously offering concrete imagery for regeneration and the restoration of the human soul yearning for truth.<sup>2</sup> The narrative density of water, its capacity to simultaneously signify death (drowning, flood) and life (springs, rain), makes it an exceptionally fertile subject for religious literary analysis. This article approaches water not primarily as a theological abstraction isolated from cultural context, but as a literary motif that structures narratives and ritual performances. This approach situates the analysis firmly within the framework of religious literature studies rather than purely dogmatic theology, thereby aligning with the foundational objective of examining how sacred texts and traditions generate and transmit meaning across different media and historical settings.

The Gospel of John represents a paradigmatic example of canonical written religious literature, distinguished by its profound symbolic and pneumatological treatment of water. Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which tend to treat water in historical-narrative contexts or ethical parables, the Johannine text elevates water to a central organizing metaphor, i.e., "living water" (*hydōr zōn*) which is intimately connected to the Holy Spirit and the gift of eternal life.<sup>3</sup> This Johannine innovation is best understood against the Old Testament background of "living water" (*mayim chayim*), which appears in ritual contexts (Leviticus 14:5–6) and prophetic metaphors (Jeremiah 2:13; Ezekiel 47:1–12). John appropriates this heritage and substantially reorients it: water no longer merely purifies externally but

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<sup>2</sup>Lauren Rowley, "Time With Water," in *Curriculum as Lived* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2025), 121–28, <https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80592-164-620251009>. Cf. Oluwaseyi B. Ayeni et al., "Water as Cultural Memory: The Symbolism of Flow in African Spiritual Imagination," *Humanities* 15, no. 2 (February 3, 2026): 25, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h15020025>.

<sup>3</sup>J Joubert, "Johannine Metaphors/Symbols Linked to the Paraclete-Spirit and Their Theological Implications," *Acta Theologica* 27, no. 1 (December 20, 2007), <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v27i1.5493>. Cf. Sherri Brown, "Water Imagery and the Power and Presence of God in the Gospel of John," *Theology Today* 72, no. 3 (October 2, 2015): 289–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573615601471>.

becomes the vehicle for internal ontological regeneration. Through Jesus' dialogues with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) and the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–42), John constructs water as an initiatory medium that requires "birth from above" (*anóthen*) as a prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> Composed in Ephesus toward the end of the first century, this Gospel reflects a community negotiating its identity amidst the pressures of Jewish tradition, the destruction of the Temple (70 Common Era [CE]), and the influence of Hellenistic thought.<sup>5</sup> These specific Johannine passages, i.e., John 3 and 4 were selected for analysis not only because they contain explicit water discourses but because they structurally represent the two primary dimensions of initiation (individual rebirth in John 3 and communal inclusivity in John 4), making them exemplary canonical texts for comparative religious literary study. The intense concentration of water symbolism in these two chapters provides a sufficiently dense textual corpus for systematic comparison with an oral ritual counterpart.

Conversely, the *Martutu Aek* tradition among the Batak Toba people of Indonesia represents a living form of oral religious literature, deeply embedded in local cosmology, kinship structures, and ancestral veneration.<sup>6</sup> Etymologically, *Martutu*

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<sup>4</sup>Athanasios Despotis, "Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus: Fresh Perspectives from John's Hellenistic Background and Chrysostomic Reception," *Journal of Early Christian History* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): 68–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2018.1491320>. Cf. Willem H. Oliver, "The Water in John 3:5," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (November 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2570>.

<sup>5</sup>Elna Mouton, "Torah Reimagined between Σάραξ and Δόξα?: Implied Household Ethos in the Fourth Gospel," *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 3 (2016): 93–112, <https://doi.org/10.1353/neo.2016.0020>. Cf. Godibert K. Gharbin and Ernest van Eck, "The Johannine Prologue: A Hermeneutical Key to the Community Theme," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (October 13, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2621>.

<sup>6</sup>Daniel Razsekar Panjaitan, "Baptisan Menurut Injil Yohanes Dan Dalam Tradisi Batak Toba," *Diegesis: Jurnal Teologi* 10, no. 2 (2025): 121–35. Cf. Bisuk Siahaan, *Batak Toba Kehidupan Di Balik Tembok Bambu* (Jakarta: Kempala Foundation, 2005).

*Aek* translates to "water purifying" or "water ceremony," and practically, it is an initiation ceremony performed for a thirty-day-old infant, introducing the child to the natural environment, the clan community, and the Supreme Creator, Debata Mulajadi Nabolon.<sup>7</sup> In Batak cosmology, water is not merely an inanimate physical element but a spiritual conduit possessing *tondi* (spirit) and *sahala* (dignity or spiritual power), which connect individuals to their ancestral lineage and ensure socio-cosmic harmony.<sup>8</sup>

The ritual is conducted at a *mual na tio* (clear spring), which is considered a sacred site where the earthly and spiritual realms intersect. The performance involves a traditional leader who recites sacred poetic prayers while burning incense, with the rising smoke visually marking the meeting point between the mortal world and the presence of Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. In stark contrast to the solitary reading of a written text, this ritual functions as a performative text that enacts and transmits the ethical, aesthetic and theological values of the Batak Toba community through embodied actions, prayers, and communal feasting involving the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship structure (*Somba Marhula-hula, Elek Marboru, and Manat Mardongan Tubu*).<sup>9</sup> Its

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<sup>7</sup>Hery Buha Manalu, "'Martutu Aek', Ritual Budaya Batak Menanamkan Nilai Cinta Tanah Air," *Innovative: Journal Of Social Science Research* 4, no. 1 (2024): 7960–73, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.31004/innovative.v4i1.8607>.

<sup>8</sup>Yohanes Anjar Donobakti, "Sebuah Pemahaman Tentang Spiritualitas Penduduk Asli Batak Toba Dan Pengaruhnya Dalam Kehidupan Sehari-Hari," *Logos* 16, no. 2 (December 14, 2020): 81–95, <https://doi.org/10.54367/logos.v16i2.1032>. Cf. Riris Johanna Siagian, "Examining the Adaptation of Batak Customs in Response to Social Change: An Assessment of the Presence of Sahala and Character Traits," *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities* 5, no. 3 (May 31, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.58256/feze7416>.

<sup>9</sup>Adison Adrian Sihombing, "Mengenal Budaya Batak Toba Melalui Falsafah 'Dalihan Na Tolu' (Perspektif Kohesi Dan Kerukunan)," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan* 16, no. 2 (December 31, 2018): 347–71, <https://doi.org/10.31291/jlk.v16i2.553>. Cf. Livia Angelina Soetanto and Maria Veronica Gandha, "Dalihan Na Tolu: Cara Hidup Orang Batak" *Jurnal Sains, Teknologi, Urban, Perancangan, Arsitektur (Stupa)* 3, no. 1 (May 30, 2021): 297, <https://doi.org/10.24912/stupa.v3i1.10807>. Cf. Hery Buha Manalu, "Merging with the Universe: The Batak Ritual in the 'Martutu Aek' Ceremony," *Jurnal Ilmiah Multidisiplin* 1, no. 5 (2024): 354–60, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.62017/merdeka>.

oral and performative nature does not diminish its authority as a religious text; rather, it exemplifies a distinct mode of transmitting theological wisdom through sensory experience and collective memory, thereby deserving serious consideration as a counterpart to canonical written literature within the scope of religious literature studies.

A review of previous studies reveals a sharp dichotomy in the treatment of these two traditions, which has hindered the development of a comprehensive comparative religious literary approach. On the one hand, leading biblical scholars have extensively examined the pneumatological and Christocentric dimensions of "living water" in the Johannine corpus, exploring its Old Testament roots, intertestamental developments, and Hellenistic parallels.<sup>10</sup> Mouton and Gharbin and van Eck examine the cosmopolitan Johannine situation and its dialectical negotiations,<sup>11</sup> while Dube explores the internalized spirit identity and its implications for community formation.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Zheng and Budiraharjo have analyzed the literary symbolism of water, yet their work remains within the confines of textual analysis.<sup>13</sup> However, these studies are predominantly textual-exegetical in nature and tend to isolate the biblical text from ritual realities practiced by indigenous communities outside the Western world, often treating context merely as background noise rather than as an equal partner in theological dialogue. On the other hand, studies on the *Martutu Aek* ritual have largely been dominated by anthropological and ethnographic approaches, which successfully

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<sup>10</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 85–89. cf. Andrea Taschl-Erber, "Christological Transformation of the Motif of 'Living Water' (John 4; 7): Prophetic Messiah Expectations and Wisdom Tradition," in *Reading the Gospel of John's Christology as Jewish Messianism* (Brill, 2018), 248–70. Cf. Oliver, "The Water in John 3:5."

<sup>11</sup> Jonly Joihin, "Yesus Adalah Roti Kehidupan: Analisis Naratif Yohanes 6:1-71," *Jurnal Amanat Agung* 6, no. 2 (2010): 215–44.

<sup>12</sup> Zorodzai Dube, "Discursive Investigation into John's Internalised Spirit Identity and Its Implication," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 72, no. 1 (February 4, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i1.3113>.

<sup>13</sup> zheng And Budiraharjo, "The Symbolism Of Water In The Gospel Of John." 242–56.

document its performativity, symbolic steps, and social functions.<sup>14</sup> Scholars like Gultom and Pasaribu have begun to integrate ecological perspectives into the discussion of Batak spirituality,<sup>15</sup> while Batubara have examined indigenous theologies in Indonesia more broadly.<sup>16</sup> Yet, despite these contributions, the ritual is frequently reduced to a social phenomenon, agrarian cycle, or oral folklore without engaging its theological architecture within an equivalent space of systematic religious literary discourse.<sup>17</sup> This methodological separation between textual criticism and ethnographic inquiry has limited the intellectual exchange between the two disciplines, leaving potential comparative insights underdeveloped.

This scholarly division leaves a significant and unexplored gap in the academic discourse of religious studies, particularly within the Indonesian context. To date, no study has systematically brought together a canonical written text and an oral performative ritual tradition within a unified framework of

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<sup>14</sup> Kembarto Marbun, "Dialog Budaya Dalam Suku Batak Toba," *Perspektif* 13, no. 1 (June 1, 2018): 27–38, <https://doi.org/10.69621/jpf.v13i1.102>. Cf. Johnson P. Robinsar Siregar, Teddi Paul Sihombing, and Ro Sininta Hutabarat, "Land Theology: Intrigue View of Land According to the Culture of the Toba Batak People in Ecological Preservation," *Eduvest - Journal of Universal Studies* 3, no. 8 (August 21, 2023): 1465–74, <https://doi.org/10.59188/eduvest.v3i8.895>. Cf. Herbert A Lumbanbatu, "The Batak Toba Tribe's Cultural Capital in the Context of Protecting Natural Resources from Environmental Threats," *Journal of Socio-Cultural Sustainability and Resilience* 2, no. 2 (January 31, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.61511/jscsr.v2i2.2025.1493>.

<sup>15</sup> Josua Gesima Gultom, "Eko-Spiritualitas Trinitaris," *Collecta: Journal of Theology and Christian Tradition* 1, no. 2 (September 29, 2024): 167–80, <https://doi.org/10.62926/jtct.v1i2.50>. See. Andar G. Pasaribu, Roy C.H.P. Sipahutar, and Eduward H. Hutabarat, "Imago Dei and Ecology: Rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the Perspective of Toba Batak in the Ecological Struggle in Tapanuli, Indonesia," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 43, no. 1 (September 15, 2022): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v43i1.2620>.

<sup>16</sup> Cindy Vebyola Batubara, Alwi Dahlan Ritonga, and Sakti Ritonga, "Indigenous Theologies in Indonesia: Syncretism, State Recognition, and the Resilience of Aliran Kepercayaan," *Pharos Journal of Theology*, no. 106.5 (November 2025), <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.521>.

<sup>17</sup> Panjaitan, "Baptisan Menurut Injil Yohanes Dan Dalam Tradisi Batak Toba." 121-35.

comparative religious literature, with a biblical-theological reading as the primary analytical lens. Where comparative efforts have been made, they have often tended toward syncretic simplification or superficial parallels that overlook the fundamental theological tensions between these two types of religious literature.<sup>18</sup> The absence of such a dialogue means that the potential for a biblical-theological reading to engage seriously with oral ritual traditions without reducing the latter to mere "data" or "cultural background", remains largely unexplored. This absence carries concrete implications for Indonesian contextual theology, which often lacks the rigorous textual anchor provided by biblical criticism, while biblical studies frequently remain detached from the vibrant ritual realities of local communities.

To address these gaps, this article aims to compare the construction and interpretation of water symbolism in the Gospel of John and the *Martutu Aek* ritual as two distinct yet comparable forms of religious literature, written canonical text and oral performative ritual text. Specifically, it seeks to elucidate the fundamental differences in their theological orientations through a biblical-theological and hermeneutic-comparative analytical approach. By applying six structured deductive categories, i.e., the symbolism of water, purification, identity formation, communal integration, transformation, and ritual orientation—this study systematically investigates the functions and meanings attached to water in both traditions. It explains how the Johannine narrative directs water toward an eschatological-transcendental transformation for eternal life, whereas the *Martutu Aek* ritual emphasizes a restorative-immanent transformation aimed at rebuilding socio-cosmic harmony among humans, clan communities, the natural environment, and ancestors. A key structural distinction that informs this comparison is the orientation of each tradition toward time and transformation: the Johannine model is linear and eschatologically directed, while the

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<sup>18</sup>Marianne Moyaert, "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems," *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 1 (January 8, 2018): 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816017000360>. Cf. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology* (London: Wiley, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444318951>.

Martutu Aek model is cyclical and restoratively anchored in the present. This linear/cyclical distinction will serve as an organizing axis throughout the analysis.

The contribution of this article lies on three aspects. First, it enriches the study of religious literature in the Nusantara by offering a replicable comparative model that treats ritual as a "living text" with theological depth, an approach inspired by the methodological insights of Clooney and Moyaert's ritual turn in comparative theology.<sup>19</sup> This model demonstrates that oral traditions can be read with the same analytical rigor as canonical texts, provided the appropriate hermeneutical tools are employed. Second, it provides a constructive reading of the relationship between canonical texts and oral religious traditions, demonstrating that these two forms of religious literature are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary in their symbolic functions, thereby challenging the perceived hierarchy of written over oral texts in theological discourse. Third, it enriches biblical theology by showing its relevance and applicability in dialoguing with local wisdom, moving beyond purely text-centered frameworks to embrace contextual engagement with ecological stewardship and social cohesion in Indonesia. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that examining these texts together reveals the vast potential of water as a unifying literary motif that bridges communal identity and theological hope, offering fresh pathways for contextual theological reflection in the archipelago.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative library research design with a hermeneutic-comparative approach, integrating a biblical-theological reading as the primary analytical framework. Critically, this research is not a fieldwork ethnography; rather, it is a qualitative library study that uses published ethnographic documentation of the *Martutu Aek* ritual as secondary textual material.<sup>20</sup> This distinction is methodologically significant, as the study operates as a qualitative library research design that draws

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<sup>19</sup>Clooney, *Comparative Theology*. Cf. Moyaert, "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems."

<sup>20</sup>Gandi Wibowo; Gian Gideon Akin, *Pengantar Metode Kualitatif Dalam Ilmu Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen* (Sumedang: Mega Press, 2024), 21.

on published ethnographic documentation rather than firsthand observation.

The objects of analysis are clearly defined. The primary object comprises the Gospel of John, specifically John 3:1–21 (Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus on rebirth through water and Spirit) and John 4:1–42 (Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman on living water).<sup>21</sup> These passages are selected for their concentrated and theologically dense treatment of water symbolism. The secondary object consists of written documentation of the *Martutu Aek* ritual, preserved in academic literature, ethnographic reports, and scholarly reference works.<sup>22</sup> The data sources are divided accordingly: primary data is the Johannine text; secondary data encompasses peer-reviewed journal articles, published ethnographic monographs, and academic books on Batak Toba culture and cosmology.

To ensure scholarly rigor, secondary sources on *Martutu Aek* were selected purposively based on three criteria: (1) direct relevance to the ritual's procedural and symbolic dimensions, (2) adequacy of symbolic description to support comparative thematic analysis, and (3) academic credibility, prioritizing sources from peer-reviewed journals and reputable academic presses. The analytical approach is twofold. First, a biblical-theological reading interprets Johannine water symbolism within its narrative-theological framework, attending to Old Testament intertextuality (Ezekiel 36:25–27; Jeremiah 2:13) and the motifs of rebirth, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life.<sup>23</sup> Second, a comparative hermeneutic approach brings these findings into dialogue with the ethnographic documentation of *Martutu Aek*, identifying structural convergences and theological divergences through the lens of the "ritual turn" in comparative theology.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Oliver, "The Water in John 3:5."

<sup>22</sup>Panjaitan, "Baptisan Menurut Injil Yohanes Dan Dalam Tradisi Batak Toba." 121-35.

<sup>23</sup>Taschl-Erber, "Christological Transformation of the Motif of 'Living Water' (John 4; 7): Prophetic Messiah Expectations and Wisdom Tradition."

<sup>24</sup>Moyaert, "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems."

The analysis is structured around six deductive categories: (1) the symbolism of water, (2) purification, (3) identity formation, (4) communal integration, (5) transformation, and (6) ritual orientation. These categories were chosen because they collectively capture the multidimensional functions of water in religious literature—from individual internal experience to corporate social cohesion—and enable a systematic side-by-side comparison between the canonical text and the oral ritual tradition. Finally, this study acknowledges its limitations: it does not involve direct fieldwork, does not claim to represent all Batak Toba regional variations, and is confined exclusively to John 3–4 and the selected *Martutu Aek* corpus. Future research may expand the textual and ritual scope to validate or extend these findings.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Findings

The comparative analysis of water symbolism in the Gospel of John and the *Martutu Aek* ritual, conducted through six deductive categories, yields four principal findings. These findings are summarized in Table 1 and elaborated in the subsequent narrative sections.

**Table 1.**  
**Summary of Comparative Findings on Water Symbolism**

No	Category	The Gospel of John	<i>Martutu Aek</i>
1	Symbolism of Water	Water signifies spiritual rebirth and eternal life; "living water" ( <i>hydōr zōn</i> ) is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit and eschatological salvation (John 4:14; 7:38–39).	Water is a physical and spiritual cleanser, a conduit connecting individuals to ancestors, the divine (Debata Mulajadi Nabolon), and cosmic harmony.
2	Purification	Purification echoes Levitical cleansing (Lev. 14:8–9; Num. 19:17–19) but is internalized as spiritual rebirth	Purification removes negative influences, evil spirits, and cosmic imbalances through the ritual washing of the infant at a clear spring ( <i>mual na tio</i> ).

		through water and the Spirit (John 3:5).	
3	Identity Formation	A new identity as a child of God, replacing the old identity of Israel as the firstborn son (Ex. 4:22), with universal sonship through the Spirit.	An identity as a member of the Batak clan community, harmoniously connected to ancestors, the <i>Dalihan Na Tolu</i> kinship structure, and the natural environment.
4	Community Integration	Integration into the community of believers as the body of Christ, transcending ethnic and social boundaries.	Integration into families, clans ( <i>marga</i> ), and indigenous communities through the <i>Dalihan Na Tolu</i> kinship system.
5	Transformation	A complete spiritual journey from the old life of the flesh to eternal life, involving intellectual, emotional, and ontological new birth	Social and cosmic transformation: from crisis to recovery; the infant's <i>tondi</i> (spirit) is strengthened and harmonized with the universe.
6	Ritual Orientation	Eschatological-transcendental: water directs believers toward future eternal life and present communion with God.	Restorative-immanent: water reestablishes socio-cosmic harmony among humans, clan communities, nature, and ancestors.

## Water as a Medium of Initiation

Table 1 (Category 1) establishes that both traditions assign water a primary symbolic function as a medium of initiation into a new spiritual and communal order, yet each tradition frames this initiatory role within a distinct theological horizon. In the Gospel of John, “living water” (*hydōr zōn*) is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit and eschatological salvation (John 4:14; 7:38–39). Water here is not a merely ritual substance but the vehicle through which the divine life is communicated to the believer, marking an irreversible transition from the realm of *sarx* (flesh) to that of *pneuma* (Spirit). In *Martutu Aek*, by contrast, water functions simultaneously as a physical and spiritual cleanser—a conduit that connects the newly born infant to ancestors, to Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, and to the wider cosmic order. Despite this horizon difference, both traditions treat water as a liminal medium: a substance that dissolves prior boundaries and enables passage into a qualitatively different social and spiritual status.

The Gospel of John presents water as the medium for spiritual rebirth into the Kingdom of God (John 3:3–5), while *Martutu Aek* employs water to initiate a thirty-day-old infant into the Batak Toba clan community, the natural environment, and the ancestral-cosmic order presided over by Debata Mulajadi Nabolon.<sup>25</sup> In both cases, water facilitates the crossing of boundaries—between spiritual death and life in the Johannine tradition, and between the vulnerability of the newborn and full communal belonging in *Martutu Aek*. What differentiates the two, however, is the scope and direction of this initiation: the Johannine water rite opens onto a universal and eschatological horizon, while the *Martutu Aek* initiation is anchored within a specific genealogical and ecological community whose boundaries are simultaneously social, natural, and ancestral.

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<sup>25</sup>Manalu, “‘Martutu Aek’, Ritual Budaya Batak Menanamkan Nilai Cinta Tanah Air.” 7960-73.

## Water as Purification with Different Theological Bases

Category 2 of Table 1 reveals that purification constitutes the most directly shared functional category between the two traditions, yet the theological foundations of this shared function diverge sharply. In the Gospel of John, purification echoes the Levitical cleansing rites of the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 14:8–9; Num. 19:17–19), wherein water removes ritual uncleanness and restores access to the sacred community. John, however, internalizes and eschatologizes this pattern: the water in John 3:5—“born of water and the Spirit”—is no longer a periodic, externally administered cleansing but a once-and-for-all ontological rebirth that purifies the inner person for eternal life. The locus of purification shifts from the body to the soul, and its horizon shifts from the ritual-present to the eschatological.<sup>26</sup>

In *Martutu Aek*, purification operates on an entirely different register. Water is employed to cleanse the infant from negative spiritual forces, evil spirits, and cosmic imbalances—removing what the tradition identifies as harmful intrusions that disturb the delicate equilibrium between the child’s *tondi* (soul-spirit) and the surrounding world. The ritual washing at a *mual na tio* (clear spring) is not a metaphorical act but a materially efficacious one: the flowing clarity of the spring water physically carries away impurities while simultaneously transmitting the spiritual potency of the ancestral landscape. In this sense, the purification enacted in *Martutu Aek* is cosmological rather than eschatological, and immanent rather than transcendent—it restores the child’s *tondi* to ecological and ancestral harmony rather than orienting it toward a future divine communion.<sup>27</sup> John’s purification is therefore theological and transcendent; *Martutu Aek*’s is cosmological and immanent—a distinction that maps directly onto the linear/cyclical axis that structures the overall comparison.

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<sup>26</sup>Oliver, “The Water in John 3:5.”

<sup>27</sup>Donobakti, “Sebuah Pemahaman Tentang Spiritualitas Penduduk Asli Batak Toba Dan Pengaruhnya Dalam Kehidupan Sehari-Hari.” 81–95.; Cf. Marbun, “Dialog Budaya Dalam Suku Batak Toba.” 27-38.

## Water as an Agent of Transformation

Category 5 of Table 1 reveals a striking parallel in the transformative scope assigned to water in both traditions, even as the direction of that transformation diverges. In the Gospel of John, the transformation enacted by water is total and multi-dimensional: it encompasses intellectual transformation (Nicodemus is challenged to reconceive what “birth” means), emotional transformation (the Samaritan woman moves from suspicion to proclamation), and ontological transformation (the believer is constituted anew as a child of God through the indwelling Spirit). This is not incremental moral improvement but a complete spiritual journey from the old life of the flesh to the new life of the Spirit, culminating in eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*). Water in John is therefore an eschatologically transformative element: it dissolves the old self and reconstitutes the believer within the divine economy of salvation.

In *Martutu Aek*, transformation is equally comprehensive but oriented toward social and cosmic restoration rather than eschatological reconstitution. The infant’s *tondi* enters the world in a state of potential vulnerability—susceptible to malevolent spiritual forces, cosmically unanchored, and socially unrecognized. The ritual washing is designed to resolve this condition: it strengthens the infant’s *tondi*, harmonizes the child with the universe, and moves the family from a state of crisis (the liminal danger of the newborn period) to one of recovery and integration. Where John’s water makes the believer *new* in an ontological sense, *Martutu Aek*’s water makes the infant *whole* in a cosmological sense—repairing a vulnerability rather than inaugurating an entirely new mode of existence. Both transformations, however, are total in their respective registers: neither tradition employs water as a merely supplementary or cosmetic act.

### Identity Formation and Community Integration

Categories 3 and 4 of Table 1 are treated together here because, in both traditions, identity formation and community integration are not sequential but simultaneous processes: the water rite constitutes identity *by* integrating the individual into a community, and integrates the individual into a community *by* constituting a new identity. In the Gospel of John, water-initiation creates a universal identity as “children of God” (*teknon theou*; John 1:12–13). This identity replaces the old covenantal identity of Israel as God’s firstborn son (Exod. 4:22) with a universal sonship mediated through the Spirit, available to all who receive Jesus regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social location. The Samaritan woman of John 4 exemplifies this universality: foreign, female, and socially marginalized, she becomes one of the Gospel’s most effective witnesses (John 4:39–42). The community into which water-initiation integrates believers is defined not by genealogy, geography, or law but by faith in Christ and reception of the Spirit—a transnational, trans-ethnic body of Christ that transcends ethnic and social boundaries.<sup>28</sup>

In *Martutu Aek*, identity formation operates on a contrasting principle. Water does not universalize identity but rather *particularizes* it—anchoring the infant within a specific genealogical, ecological, and ancestral network. The identity conferred is that of a member of the Batak Toba clan community, harmoniously connected to ancestors, to the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship structure, and to the natural environment. This identity is inseparable from the three relational principles: *Somba Marhulahula* (reverence toward the wife-giving lineage), *Elek Marboru* (affection toward the wife-receiving lineage), and *Manat Mardongan Tubu* (prudence toward one’s own clan members). The community into which *Martutu Aek* integrates the infant is therefore defined by kinship, territory, and ancestral obligation, integrating the child into families, clans (*marga*), and indigenous communities in a relationship that is simultaneously social,

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<sup>28</sup> Dube, “Discursive Investigation into John’s Internalised Spirit Identity and Its Implication.”

ecological, and spiritual.<sup>29</sup> The contrast with the Johannine model is stark: where John's water dissolves inherited ethnic identities into a universal community of faith, *Martutu Aek's* water consolidates and confirms a particular communal identity rooted in lineage and land.

### **Functional Convergence Across the Six Categories**

Reading across all six categories of Table 1 as a whole, a deeper pattern of functional convergence emerges beneath the surface of theological divergence. In every category, both traditions assign water a multi-dimensional role that simultaneously addresses the individual, the community, and the cosmos. The Gospel of John's living water quenches the individual's spiritual thirst (John 4:13–14), reconstitutes the community of believers as the body of Christ (Category 4), and participates in the eschatological renewal of creation signified by the outpouring of the Spirit (Category 6). *Martutu Aek's* ritual water cleanses the individual's *tondi* (Category 2), integrates the infant into the clan network (Category 4), and restores the socio-cosmic harmony between humans, nature, and ancestors (Category 6). Both traditions thus employ water as a *totalized symbol*—a single material element that simultaneously enacts meaning at the individual, communal, and cosmic levels. This functional totality confirms that the apparent simplicity of the six categories conceals a profound structural homology between two traditions that are otherwise theologically quite distant from one another.

### **Divergence in Ritual Orientation**

Category 6 of Table 1 crystallizes the most fundamental divergence between the two traditions: their respective *ritual orientations*. The Gospel of John directs water symbolism toward an eschatological-transcendental horizon: living water leads to eternal life (*zōē aiōnios*), a forward-looking, linear transformation that enables present communion with God and future salvation

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<sup>29</sup> Soetanto and Gandha, "Dalihan Na Tolu: Cara Hidup Orang Batak." 297.; Cf. Sihombing, "Mengenal Budaya Batak Toba Melalui Falsafah 'Dalihan Na Tolu' (Perspektif Kohesi Dan Kerukunan)." 347-71.

(John 4:14).<sup>30</sup> This orientation is not merely future-pointing; it reconfigures the present. The believer who receives living water already participates in eternal life *now*, even as the full consummation remains ahead. This “already/not yet” tension—characteristic of Johannine realized eschatology—means that water functions simultaneously as a present experience of the Spirit and a proleptic sign of future resurrection. The orientation is irreversibly linear: one is born again, once, from above, and this birth cannot be cyclically repeated or cosmically undone.

By contrast, *Martutu Aek* embodies a restorative-immanent orientation: water heals disrupted relationships among humans, nature, and ancestors, restoring socio-cosmic harmony in the here and now.<sup>31</sup> This orientation is cyclical rather than linear. The *Martutu Aek* ritual is not a once-and-for-all event that permanently alters the infant’s ontological status; it is one ceremony within a broader cycle of rituals that continuously maintain and restore cosmic equilibrium throughout the lifecycle of the Batak Toba individual and community. Water reestablishes socio-cosmic harmony not as a final eschatological achievement but as an ongoing, present-focused task of maintenance and repair. While John’s water theology therefore orients believers toward a transcendent future that simultaneously redefines the present, *Martutu Aek*’s water spirituality anchors individuals within a present that must be continually re-harmonized with the past. This contrast between linear-eschatological and cyclical-restorative orientations constitutes the most theologically significant finding of the comparative analysis and will serve as the primary interpretive lens in the discussion that follows.

These six findings, taken together, establish the empirical basis for the interpretive discussion that follows, wherein the theological implications of these convergences and divergences—particularly the linear/cyclical axis identified in Finding 6—will

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<sup>30</sup>Brown, “Water Imagery and the Power and Presence of God in the Gospel of John.” 289–98.

<sup>31</sup>Pasaribu, Sipahutar, and Hutabarat, “Imago Dei and Ecology: Rereading Genesis 1:26–28 from the Perspective of Toba Batak in the Ecological Struggle in Tapanuli, Indonesia.” 1–7; cf. Manalu, “Merging with the Universe: The Batak Ritual in the ‘Martutu Aek’ Ceremony.” 354-60.

be examined in depth within their respective literary and cultural contexts.

## DISCUSSION

### Biblical-Theological Reading of Water in the Gospel of John

The Johannine treatment of water, as revealed through the six analytical categories, operates within a carefully constructed theological framework that centers on the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Water in John's Gospel is not merely a physical element but a vehicle for communicating the transformative power of the Holy Spirit and the offer of eternal life.<sup>32</sup> The dialogue with Nicodemus (John 3:1–21) establishes the foundational premise that entry into the Kingdom of God requires a radical rebirth being "born of water and the Spirit" (*gennēthēnai ex hydatos kai pneumatos*). This rebirth is not a reiteration of physical birth but an ontological transformation that reorients human existence from the flesh (*sarx*) to the Spirit (*pneuma*).<sup>33</sup> The term *anothen* deliberately ambiguous, meaning both "again" and "from above" encapsulates the Johannine conviction that this transformation is both a new beginning and a divine gift.<sup>34</sup> This linguistic strategy is characteristic of John's narrative technique, which repeatedly employs double meanings to invite readers to move beyond surface-level understanding toward deeper theological insight.

The Old Testament background provides the indispensable intertextual anchor for this claim. The prophetic promise of cleansing water and a new spirit in Ezekiel 36:25–27, where God declares, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you," finds its fulfillment in Jesus, who mediates the Spirit to believers.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Jeremiah 2:13 portrays God as "the

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<sup>32</sup>Joubert, "Johannine Metaphors/Symbols Linked to the Paraclete-Spirit and Their Theological Implications."

<sup>33</sup>Despotis, "Drawing and Transcending Boundaries in the Dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus: Fresh Perspectives from John's Hellenistic Background and Chrysostomic Reception." 68–87.

<sup>34</sup>Zheng and Budiraharjo, "The Symbolism Of Water In The Gospel Of John."; cf. Panjaitan, "Baptisan Menurut Injil Yohanes Dan Dalam Tradisi Batak Toba." 121-35. 121-35.

<sup>35</sup>Taschl-Erber, "Christological Transformation of the Motif of 'Living Water' (John 4; 7): Prophetic Messiah Expectations and Wisdom Tradition."

fountain of living water," contrasting the true source of life with the broken cisterns of idolatry. John appropriates this prophetic imagery and personifies it in Jesus, who offers "living water" (*hydōr zōn*) that quenches spiritual thirst permanently.<sup>36</sup> The intertestamental developments of this motif, evident in the Qumran documents and pseudepigraphical literature, further contextualize John's usage. Miller (2018) demonstrates how flowing water (*mayim chayim*) in these traditions is often associated with the Spirit of Truth that purifies the elect.<sup>37</sup> John adopts this intertestamental expectation but effects a fundamental conceptual shift: living water is no longer the Torah or ascetic obedience but the Holy Spirit, mediated exclusively through Christ.<sup>38</sup> This Christocentric reorientation is the defining feature of Johannine pneumatology, distinguishing it from both rabbinic Judaism and Hellenistic spirituality.<sup>39</sup>

The conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4:1–42) expands the symbolism of water to encompass universality and inclusivity. The metaphor of "living water" contrasts with the stagnant water of the well, signifying the eschatological gift of the Spirit that satisfies spiritual thirst eternally.<sup>40</sup> This living water becomes a spring within the believer, "welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14), thereby directing the

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<sup>36</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 85–89.

<sup>37</sup>Shem Miller, "The Role of Performance and the Performance of Role: Cultural Memory in the Hodayot," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 2 (2018): 359–82, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2018.0020>.

<sup>38</sup>Aleksandar Djakovic, "Logos in Philo of Alexandria: Synthesis of Two Traditions," *Theoria, Beograd* 63, no. 4 (2020): 5–15, <https://doi.org/10.2298/THEO2004005D>; cf. George Thomas Kuzhippallil, "Meaning of Mystery as Process of Deification," *Religions* 15, no. 8 (August 12, 2024): 978, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15080978>.

<sup>39</sup>Jacob Klein and Nathan Powers, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190695170.013.31>.

<sup>40</sup>Zheng and Budiraharjo, "The Symbolism Of Water In The Gospel Of John." 242–56.

believer's orientation toward an eschatological horizon.<sup>41</sup> The Samaritan woman's identity foreign, female, socially marginalized, underscores the universal scope of this water symbolism; no ethnic or social boundary excludes anyone from receiving the gift of the Spirit.<sup>42</sup> John's deliberate deployment of misunderstanding as a narrative device guides the reader progressively from literal to spiritual comprehension: the woman initially understands water literally, but Jesus leads her toward a deeper theological recognition. This pedagogical technique trains readers to move from earthly to heavenly realities, teaching that water in the life of the congregation is a sign pointing to the presence of God, which transcends material things.<sup>43</sup>

Water thus serves as a marker of new identity: believers become "children of God" (*teknon theou*; John 1:12–13), a status that supersedes ethnic privilege and establishes a new community defined by faith in Christ.<sup>44</sup> Lee further argues that this filial identity is rooted in Jesus' own spirituality of affiliation with the Father, which is extended to believers through the Spirit.<sup>45</sup> The identity formation mediated by water is not merely social but ontological: believers participate in the divine life through the indwelling Spirit, a theme that resonates with the Johannine prologue's emphasis on grace and truth.<sup>46</sup> In terms of transformation, John's water symbolism is comprehensive, addressing intellectual recognition of truth, emotional joy in the Spirit, and ontological new birth.<sup>47</sup> The transformation is not

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<sup>41</sup>Larry Paul Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup>Gharbin and van Eck, "The Johannine Prologue: A Hermeneutical Key to the Community Theme."

<sup>43</sup>Jones, *The Symbol of Water in the Gospel of John*.

<sup>44</sup>Mouton, "Torah Reimagined between Σάρξ and Δόξα?: Implied Household Ethos in the Fourth Gospel." 93–112.

<sup>45</sup>Dorothy A. Lee, "Jesus' Spirituality of Affiliation in the Fourth Gospel," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (July 13, 2022): 647, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070647>.

<sup>46</sup>Gharbin and van Eck, "The Johannine Prologue: A Hermeneutical Key to the Community Theme."

<sup>47</sup>Daniel Nii Aboagye Aryeh, "The Role of Water in the Gospel of John and Its Echo in Prophetic Ministries in Africa," in *Faith, Spirituality, and Praxis* (London: Routledge, 2024), 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003520016-6>.

merely moral improvement but a re-creation of human nature from its fallen state. Purification, while echoing Levitical traditions of ritual washing (Leviticus 14:8–9; Numbers 19:17–19), is internalized as spiritual cleansing that prepares the individual for eternal communion with God.<sup>48</sup>

The eschatological-presentist dimension of this transformation is particularly significant: the future promise of eternal life becomes a present reality through the indwelling Spirit.<sup>49</sup> When water and blood flowed from Jesus' pierced side (John 19:34), John visually declared that the age of the Spirit had been historically legitimized, and that the water of baptism is inseparable from the sacrificial death of Christ.<sup>50</sup> This moment, the piercing of Jesus' side, functions as the climax of John's water symbolism, where the living water promised in John 4 and 7 is finally released through the glorified body of Christ. The orientation of this transformation is resolutely eschatological-transcendental: water directs the believer toward a future consummation, even as the Spirit makes eternal life a present reality. This forward-looking orientation distinguishes John's water theology from purely restorative or cyclical models of purification, anchoring it in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of salvation history.

### **Martutu Aek as *Oral Religious Literature***

The *Martutu Aek* ritual, when read as oral religious literature, reveals a sophisticated theological system embedded in Batak Toba cosmology and social structure. Unlike written texts that are fixed and codified, this ritual operates through

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<sup>48</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 85–89.

<sup>49</sup>Kai Hsuan Chang, "Re-Picturing the Reception of the Spirit with Ritual Experience: The Role of Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture*, October 25, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079211045295>; cf. Frederick C. Klawiter, "'Living Water' and Sanguinary Witness: John 19:34 and Martyrs of the Second and Early Third Century," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, October 8, 2015, flv095, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flv095>.

<sup>50</sup>Klawiter, "'Living Water' and Sanguinary Witness: John 19:34 and Martyrs of the Second and Early Third Century."

performance, sensory engagement, and communal participation, making it a "living text" that generates meaning through embodied action.<sup>51</sup> The ritual's performativity is evident in its structured sequence: the procession to a clear spring (*mual na tio*), the recitation of sacred prayers, the burning of incense (*daupa*), the physical washing of the infant, and the communal feast that follows.<sup>52</sup> Each step is laden with symbolic meaning, and the ritual as a whole constitutes a narrative that enacts and transmits the ethical, aesthetic, and theological values of the Batak Toba community. The performative nature of this ritual is not a weakness but a distinctive strength: it engages the entire sensorium sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing, creating a multisensory experience of the sacred that cannot be replicated by reading a text alone.

The symbolic function of water in *Martutu Aek* centers on purification and integration. Water cleanses the infant from negative spiritual influences and cosmic imbalances, ensuring that the child's *tondi* (spirit) is strong and harmoniously aligned with the universe.<sup>53</sup> In Batak cosmology, *tondi* is not a static substance but part of the universal life energy flowing from Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, while *sahala* represents the quality and intensity of *tondi* that determines a person's capacity for success and well-being.<sup>54</sup> The interplay between *tondi* and *sahala* is crucial for understanding Batak spirituality: a person with strong *sahala* is considered blessed, prosperous, and honored, while a person with weak *sahala* is vulnerable to misfortune. The *Martutu Aek* ritual is designed to strengthen the infant's *tondi* and enhance the child's potential *sahala* through the cleansing and cooling properties of

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<sup>51</sup>Panjaitan, "Baptisan Menurut Injil Yohanes Dan Dalam Tradisi Batak Toba." 121-35.; cf. Manalu, "'Martutu Aek', Ritual Budaya Batak Menanamkan Nilai Cinta Tanah Air." 7960-73.

<sup>52</sup>Manalu, "Merging with the Universe: The Batak Ritual in the 'Martutu Aek' Ceremony." 354-60.

<sup>53</sup>Donobakti, "Sebuah Pemahaman Tentang Spiritualitas Penduduk Asli Batak Toba Dan Pengaruhnya Dalam Kehidupan Sehari-Hari." 81-95; cf. Siagian, "Examining the Adaptation of Batak Customs in Response to Social Change: An Assessment of the Presence of Sahala and Character Traits."

<sup>54</sup>Johann Angerler, "Indigenous Knowledge about Time-Keeping: Astronomical Aspects of The Batak Calendar," *Indigenous Knowledge (IK)* 1, no. 1 (February 28, 2021): 1-5, <https://doi.org/10.24198/ik.v1i1.32627>.

water. Water serves to "cool the soul" (*padihot tondi*), providing the spiritual refreshment required in a culture that highly values courage and fortitude.<sup>55</sup>

This purification is not merely physical but cosmological: water restores the proper relationships among humans, the natural environment, and the ancestors.<sup>56</sup> The ecological wisdom embedded in this ritual is profound. Lumbanbatu (2025) argues that the Batak philosophy of "aek do hangoluan" (water is life) fosters a spiritual responsibility to protect forests and water sources as part of devotion to God and the ancestors.<sup>57</sup> Siregar similarly demonstrate that land and water are viewed not as exploitable resources but as sacred heritage that must be preserved for future generations.<sup>58</sup> This ecological dimension of the ritual aligns with contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability, suggesting that indigenous religious literature can contribute meaningfully to ecological ethics. By viewing water sources as sacred sites for initiation ceremonies, the Batak people have, in essence, established customary rules to maintain the cleanliness and sustainability of these springs. Water is not viewed as an inanimate object to be exploited but as the "mother of life" who provides sustenance and health.

The ritual integrates the infant into the *Dalihan Na Tolu* kinship system, which structures Batak Toba society through three relational principles *Somba Marhula-hula*, *Elek Marboru*, and *Manat Mardongan Tubu*.<sup>59</sup> Through this integration, the child receives an identity that is inseparably linked to lineage, land, and communal responsibility. The *Dalihan Na Tolu* system operates as a social regulatory mechanism that governs relationships

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<sup>55</sup>Manalu, "Merging with the Universe: The Batak Ritual in the 'Martutu Aek' Ceremony." 354-60.

<sup>56</sup>Gultom, "Eko-Spiritualitas Trinitaris." 167-80.

<sup>57</sup>Lumbanbatu, "The Batak Toba Tribe's Cultural Capital in the Context of Protecting Natural Resources from Environmental Threats."

<sup>58</sup>Siregar, Sihombing, and Hutabarat, "Land Theology: Intrigue View of Land According to the Culture of the Toba Batak People in Ecological Preservation." 1465-74.

<sup>59</sup>Soetanto and Gandha, "Dalihan Na Tolu: Cara Hidup Orang Batak." 297; Sihombing, "Mengenal Budaya Batak Toba Melalui Falsafah 'Dalihan Na Tolu' (Perspektif Kohesi Dan Kerukunan)." 347-71

between different kinship groups, ensuring social harmony and preventing conflict. The *Martutu Aek* ritual formally introduces the infant to this system, marking the child's entry into the network of mutual obligations and privileges that define Batak Toba identity. This identity formation is not individualistic but profoundly communal: a person exists not as an isolated individual but as a member of a lineage, a clan, and a community of ancestors.

The communal memory embedded in the *Martutu Aek* ritual is another crucial dimension. The performance of the ritual is not an isolated event but a re-enactment of ancestral traditions, connecting the present generation with past generations and ensuring the continuity of Batak Toba identity. The prayers recited, the spring chosen, and the offerings presented all carry the weight of collective memory, transmitted orally across generations. The ritual thus acts as a performative text that preserves and transmits theological knowledge through sensory experience and community participation. In this sense, oral religious literature like *Martutu Aek* serves a function analogous to written scripture: it encodes communal values, transmits theological meaning, and provides a framework for understanding the relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine. Its orientation is restorative-immanent: water heals disruptions and maintains the harmony of the cosmos in the present, ensuring the well-being of the community within its ecological and ancestral context. This restorative emphasis distinguishes *Martutu Aek* from eschatological models of purification, anchoring it firmly in the here and now.

Comparable purification rituals across the Indonesian archipelago, such as *Melukat* in Bali and *Padusan* in Java, suggest a shared indigenous belief system that holds water in the highest regard as a manifestation of divine energy.<sup>60</sup> However, *Martutu Aek* is distinctive in its emphasis on clan kinship structures and its connection to the history of ancestral migration from Pusuk Buhit. Batubara et al. note that indigenous theologies in Indonesia,

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<sup>60</sup>Vikry Reinaldo Paais, "Interreligious Engagement Between Indigenous Religion and Christianity Within the Huaulu Community in Maluku," *Al-Albab* 14, no. 1 (June 30, 2025): 65–86, <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v14i1.3289>.

including Batak traditions, demonstrate remarkable resilience amidst modernization, maintaining their performative vitality while engaging in creative dialogue with external religious influences.<sup>61</sup> The persistence of *Martutu Aek* in contemporary Batak Toba society, even among Christian communities, testifies to the enduring power of oral religious literature to adapt and survive in changing circumstances.

### **Comparative Interpretation and Implications for Religious Literature**

Bringing the two traditions into dialogue reveals both structural parallels and fundamental theological divergences. Structurally, both traditions employ water as a sacred medium for initiation and purification, and both utilize water to shape identity and foster community integration.<sup>62</sup> In both cases, water marks a transition from an old state to a new one: in John, from spiritual death to eternal life; in *Martutu Aek*, from vulnerability to communal belonging. Water functions as a liminal agent that mediates the crossing of boundaries between the profane and the sacred, the individual and the community, and the human and the divine.<sup>63</sup> This functional convergence suggests that water, as a universal element, possesses a narrative density that makes it exceptionally suited to bear religious meaning across diverse cultural contexts. The physical properties of water, including its fluidity, its capacity to cleanse, and its life-giving qualities, naturally lend themselves to symbolic use in religious traditions worldwide. Both John's Gospel and the *Martutu Aek* ritual exploit these properties to communicate theological truths in ways that are immediately accessible to their respective audiences.

Theological divergence, however, is equally pronounced. The Johannine water symbolism directs believers toward an eschatological-transcendental transformation: living water

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<sup>61</sup>Batubara, Ritonga, and Ritonga, "Indigenous Theologies in Indonesia: Syncretism, State Recognition, and the Resilience of Aliran Kepercayaan."

<sup>62</sup>Rowley, "Time With Water." 121–28; Sahi, "The Open Well as Symbol of the Meeting of Heaven and Earth." 103.

<sup>63</sup>Ayeni et al., "Water as Cultural Memory: The Symbolism of Flow in African Spiritual Imagination." 25.

leads to eternal life, a future-oriented reality that transcends physical death and enables present communion with God.<sup>64</sup> This orientation is linear, progressive, and focused on individual salvation within a universal community. By contrast, the *Martutu Aek* ritual emphasizes a restorative-immanent transformation: water reestablishes socio-cosmic harmony in the here and now, healing disruptions among humans, nature, and ancestors.<sup>65</sup> This orientation is cyclical, present-focused, and concerned with collective well-being within a particular kinship-based community.

This divergence is theologically significant in several respects. It reveals that the symbolism of water is remarkably flexible, capable of bearing different theological orientations depending on the cultural and historical context in which it is embedded. John's eschatological reading of water emerged from a community seeking identity and hope amidst external pressures and the loss of the Temple; water became a symbol of the Spirit's presence and the promise of eternal life.<sup>66</sup> The *Martutu Aek* ritual, by contrast, emerged from an agrarian society deeply dependent on natural resources and ancestral traditions; water became a symbol of ecological harmony and communal continuity.<sup>67</sup> Both interpretations are valid as expressions of religious meaning, and both enrich our understanding of water as a religious symbol. The divergence is not a contradiction but a complementarity: John's eschatological orientation provides a transcendent horizon for human existence, while *Martutu Aek's* restorative orientation provides an immanent anchor for daily life and communal responsibility.

This complementarity invites reflection on the nature of religious literature itself. Canonical written texts like the Gospel of John tend to privilege propositional truth, linear narrative, and universal claims. Oral ritual texts like *Martutu Aek* privilege

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<sup>64</sup>Brown, "Water Imagery and the Power and Presence of God in the Gospel of John." 289–98.

<sup>65</sup>Gultom, "Eko-Spiritualitas Trinitaris." 167-80.

<sup>66</sup>Mouton, "Torah Reimagin Ed between Σάραξ and Δόξα?: Implied Household Ethos in the Fourth Gospel." 93–112.

<sup>67</sup>Angerler, "Indigenous Knowledge about Time-Keeping: Astronomical Aspects of The Batak Calendar."

embodied practice, cyclical time, and communal identity. Neither form is epistemologically prior to the other; rather, they represent distinct but equally legitimate strategies for encoding and transmitting religious meaning. The challenge for religious literature studies is to develop methodologies that can do justice to both forms without reducing one to the other. This article has attempted to meet that challenge by applying a biblical-theological reading to both the written text and the ritual tradition, treating them as comparable forms of religious literature while respecting their distinct modes of expression.

The implications of this comparative reading are significant for religious literature studies and for contextual engagement in Indonesia. First, this study extends the discussion beyond text-centered approaches by demonstrating that oral ritual traditions can be read as "living texts" with theological depth comparable to canonical written literature.<sup>68</sup> By applying Clooney's "ritual turn" framework, this article provides a concrete example of how ritual can serve as a credible source of theological meaning alongside written scripture, thereby challenging the perceived hierarchy of written over oral texts in theological discourse.<sup>69</sup> This methodological contribution is particularly relevant for Indonesian scholarship, where the richness of oral religious traditions has often been neglected in favor of textual analysis. Second, it offers a complementary perspective on the relationship between biblical theology and local wisdom: Johannine biblical theology serves as the primary analytical tool, while *Martutu Aek* serves as a dialogue partner that enriches the reading of Scripture by grounding it in ecological and communal concerns. Third, it broadens the theological reading by including ritual literature, thereby moving beyond purely textual frameworks to embrace contextual engagement with issues of social cohesion and environmental stewardship.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>Moyaert, "Towards a Ritual Turn in Comparative Theology: Opportunities, Challenges, and Problems."

<sup>69</sup>Akin, *Pengantar Metode Kualitatif Dalam Ilmu Teologi Dan Pendidikan Kristen*.

<sup>70</sup>Paais, "Interreligious Engagement Between Indigenous Religion and Christianity Within the Huaulu Community in Maluku." 65–86.

Crucially, this comparative reading does not equate the two traditions doctrinally. The Gospel of John, as canonical Scripture, holds a distinct normative authority within Christian theology. The *Martutu Aek* ritual, as oral religious literature, is studied as a form of religious expression that illuminates the broader dynamics of water symbolism in human culture. The dialogue between them is a hermeneutical exercise, not a theological synthesis that collapses their differences. Johannine biblical theology remains the primary analytical lens; *Martutu Aek* remains the dialogue partner. The result is a comparative reading that respects the integrity of both traditions while demonstrating their mutual illumination. This approach avoids the pitfalls of syncretism, which would uncritically merge the two traditions, while also avoiding the trap of pure textual isolation, which would neglect the richness of oral ritual expression.

In the Indonesian context, this comparative model offers practical pathways for contextual theology. By linking Jesus' concept of "living water" with the Batak philosophy of "aek do hangoluan," churches in the Lake Toba region can foster environmental awareness rooted in both faith and tradition.<sup>71</sup> Protecting natural water sources becomes not merely a governmental responsibility but a form of devotion to the Giver of Living Water and a sign of respect for ancestors who safeguarded these springs for generations.

Furthermore, this integration helps Batak Christian communities affirm their cultural identity without feeling alienated from their heritage; Christian baptism can be understood as affirming the values of purity taught by ancestors through *Martutu Aek*. This hybrid identity is a strength for Indonesia's diverse society in fostering religious moderation rooted in local wisdom.<sup>72</sup> The dialogue between canonical text and oral tradition offers a model for a spirituality rooted in the world yet open to transcendence, an archipelagic spirituality that celebrates life in all its dimensions. Such a spirituality is urgently

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<sup>71</sup>Lumbanbatu, "The Batak Toba Tribe's Cultural Capital in the Context of Protecting Natural Resources from Environmental Threats."

<sup>72</sup>Paais, "Interreligious Engagement Between Indigenous Religion and Christianity Within the Huaulu Community in Maluku." 65–86.

needed in a nation facing ecological crises, social fragmentation, and the challenge of maintaining unity in diversity.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis of water symbolism in the Gospel of John and the *Martutu Aek* ritual demonstrates that both traditions employ water as a sacred medium for initiation, purification, and the formation of communal identity. The Johannine narrative, as a canonical written text, presents water as the vehicle for spiritual rebirth through the Holy Spirit, directing believers toward an eschatological-transcendental transformation that culminates in eternal life. In contrast, the *Martutu Aek* ritual, as an oral performative religious text, emphasizes a restorative-immanent transformation that reestablishes socio-cosmic harmony among humans, clan communities, the natural environment, and ancestors. These functional convergences and theological divergences reveal that water, as a religious symbol, possesses a remarkable capacity to bear different orientations depending on the cultural and historical contexts in which it is embedded.

The contribution of this article to religious literature studies is threefold. First, it provides a replicable comparative model that brings together a canonical written text and an oral ritual tradition within a unified analytical framework, thereby extending the discussion beyond purely text-centered approaches. Second, it demonstrates that the "ritual turn" in comparative theology, can be operationalized in the Indonesian context by treating ritual as a "living text" with theological depth comparable to written scripture. Third, it enriches biblical theology by showing its relevance and applicability in dialoguing with local wisdom, moving beyond textual isolation to embrace contextual engagement with ecological and communal concerns.

The implications of this study extend to three interconnected domains. For the study of religious literature in the Nusantara, this article offers a methodological pathway for engaging seriously with oral traditions as legitimate sources of theological meaning, demonstrating that oral ritual traditions warrant the same analytical rigor as canonical written texts within the framework of

comparative religious literature. For the church and theological education in Indonesia, this comparative model provides a framework for integrating local cultural symbols into liturgical practice and theological reflection, fostering a spirituality that is both biblically grounded and culturally resonant. For the reading of local traditions, this study underscores the importance of approaching indigenous rituals with academic rigor and hermeneutical sensitivity, avoiding both syncretic reductionism and dismissive exclusivism.

This study acknowledges several limitations that invite further research. The analysis is confined exclusively to John 3:1–21 and 4:1–42, and does not engage with other Johannine water references, such as the water from Jesus' side (John 19:34) or the water imagery in the Book of Revelation. Similarly, the *Martutu Aek* ritual is examined through published ethnographic documentation rather than firsthand observation, meaning that regional variations and contemporary developments in the ritual practice may not be fully captured. Future studies are encouraged to expand the textual corpus to include other Johannine passages and to incorporate comparative analysis with other water rituals across the Indonesian archipelago, such as *Melukat* in Bali or *Padusan* in Java, in order to validate, challenge, or extend the findings of this study. Such research would further enrich the discourse on religious literature in Indonesia and contribute to the development of a contextual theology that is both academically rigorous and socially relevant. Water, as both physical element and theological symbol, remains the most potent of literary motifs precisely because it is inexhaustible, capable of sustaining an eschatological hope and an immanent rootedness simultaneously, and thus uniquely suited to bridge the canonical and the communal in the religious literatures of the archipelago.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author would like to thank the HKBP Theological Seminary for its intellectual and technical support, as well as for the materials it has provided, which have contributed to the completion of this article. The author has ensured that the parties mentioned in these acknowledgements have given their consent to the inclusion of their names.

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