



Decolonizing Christian Education in Batak: Initiating Curriculum Transformation

Herman Tampubolon¹, Izak Y.M. Lattu¹, Mariska Lauterboom¹, Tony Tampake¹

¹Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana Salatiga, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: Herman Tampubolon

E-mail: 762022003@student.uksw.edu



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Abstract

This article examines the enduring colonial legacy within Christian education in the Batak region, which has systematically marginalized indigenous knowledge and privileged Western pedagogical paradigms as the normative expression of Christianity. Focusing on the Sunday School ministry of the Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI) church, the study initiates a critical inquiry into curriculum transformation through the lens of decolonial theory. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates the sociology of education, sociology of religion, and decolonial studies, qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with two pastoral practitioners and contextual observations. The Batak philosophy of Sala Mandasor Segi Luhutan (SMSL) serves as a critical framework to deconstruct entrenched Eurocentric curricula and reconstruct pedagogical practices that center indigenous epistemology. Findings reveal that despite HKI's historical resistance to missionary hegemony, its Sunday School curriculum remains dominated by hierarchical, banking-model pedagogy that treats children as passive recipients. Indigenous cultural elements are largely confined to ceremonial performances rather than substantive instructional integration, perpetuating epistemic alienation and dehumanization. The study argues that authentic decolonization requires pastors and educators to transition toward dialogical, problem-posing methodologies that recognize Sunday School children as active epistemic subjects bearing the imago Dei. By embedding Batak kinship values, oral traditions, and symbolic frameworks into core biblical instruction, Christian education can become a liberating practice that honors cultural heritage while fostering theological contextualization. This research offers a strategic pathway for ecclesiastical curriculum reform ahead of HKI's centenary in 2027.

Introduction

The arrival of the Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft (RMG) in the Batak region in 1861 fundamentally reconfigured the educational, cultural, and religious landscapes of indigenous communities. Missionary pedagogy, deeply rooted in European Pietism and colonial administrative frameworks, systematically positioned Western epistemology as the normative expression of Christianity while marginalizing local knowledge systems (Manullang & Pakpahan, 2021; Tumanggor, 2021). This asymmetric power dynamic established a hierarchical educational paradigm in which Western curricular models, domestic practices, and liturgical traditions were institutionalized as superior, thereby embedding colonial structures into the very fabric of Batak Christian identity (Manurung, 2022; Siahaan & Agustono, 2021). Consequently, indigenous ways of knowing were not merely sidelined but actively delegitimized, creating a legacy in which educational modernization became synonymous with cultural Westernization.

In contemporary practice, this historical legacy persists through curricular mechanisms that function as instruments of epistemic marginalization and child dehumanization. Curricula are inherently non-neutral, and when designed around indoctrinative methodologies, they systematically suppress critical inquiry, treat learners as passive recipients, and perpetuate what scholars term epistemicide the erasure of local knowledge in favor of dominant Western epistemologies (Buchori et al., 2023; Masvotore, 2022). Such educational environments operate through hidden curricula that reinforce ideological conformity, effectively stripping indigenous children of their cultural anchors and reducing their developmental potential to mechanical compliance (Gascón & Herrero, 2024; Ibiyemi, 2021; Kennedy & Kohan, 2021). When education prioritizes dogmatic transmission over dialogical engagement, it ceases to be a liberating practice and instead becomes a structural tool of dehumanization (Thornton et al., 2024).

Within this pedagogical landscape, Sunday School (SS) occupies a strategically critical yet deeply compromised position. As the earliest formal space for faith formation within church structures, SS serves as a primary site for shaping children's spiritual, cognitive, and socio-emotional identities during their most developmentally receptive years (Avellia et al., 2023; Putrawan & Eunike, 2022; Simanjuntak, 2023). Theologically, it is envisioned as a community of faith that nurtures holistic identity formation through relational, contextually grounded practices (Lasut et al., 2021; Nadia, 2021). However, in many Batak congregations, SS curricula have inadvertently replicated colonial-indoctrinative patterns, relegating indigenous culture to performative rituals during special occasions rather than integrating it as a substantive, pedagogical framework for encountering the divine (Dalensang & Molle, 2021; Simanjuntak & Prayitno, 2022).

Addressing this epistemic imbalance requires a deliberate decolonial turn that repositions indigenous knowledge not as a supplementary cultural artifact, but as a legitimate theological and pedagogical foundation. Decolonizing Christian education does not entail the wholesale rejection of Western scholarship; rather, it demands an epistemic rebalancing that dismantles Eurocentric hegemony while centering local worldviews as valid pathways for theological reflection and spiritual formation (Dei, 2023; I. Lattu, 2023; Pui-lan, 2021). By challenging the hidden curricula that normalize Western superiority, educators can cultivate learning environments that honor children's cultural heritage, restore their critical agency, and affirm their full personhood as *imago Dei* (García-Louis, 2022; Stockman & Wilson, 2022; Ward, 2025).

The Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI) church presents a compelling institutional paradox that underscores the urgency of this curricular transformation. Historically, HKI (originally founded as HChB in 1927) emerged as a pioneering act of ecclesiastical decolonization, deliberately resisting German missionary control and reclaiming indigenous kinship systems and sacred music as legitimate expressions of Christian worship (I. Lattu, 2024; Siregar, 2020). Yet, despite this anti-colonial origin, HKI's contemporary Sunday School curriculum remains heavily influenced by Western pedagogical templates, revealing a critical disconnect between historical resistance and current educational practice. This paradox highlights how colonial epistemologies can become institutionalized even within churches that once championed cultural autonomy, necessitating a deliberate pedagogical intervention.

To bridge this gap, this article proposes the Batak philosophy of *Sala Mandasor Sega Luhutan* (SMSL) as a critical-deconstructive framework for curriculum transformation. Rooted in indigenous agrarian wisdom, SMSL asserts that when a foundational structure is flawed, it must be entirely dismantled and authentically rebuilt rather than superficially patched (I. Lattu,

2023; Thornton et al., 2024). Applied to Christian education, this principle mandates the systematic deconstruction of indoctrinative, Eurocentric curricula and their replacement with dialogical, culturally responsive pedagogies that position Batak children as active subjects rather than passive objects. By embedding indigenous epistemology into SS instructional design, the curriculum can shift from cultural erasure to cultural reclamation, fostering a faith formation process that is both theologically sound and contextually rooted.

This article aims to critically analyze the colonial residues embedded in HKI's Sunday School curriculum and propose a decolonial transformation model grounded in Batak epistemic traditions. Employing an interdisciplinary critical approach that integrates the sociology of education, sociology of religion, and decolonial studies, the study draws on qualitative interviews with pastoral practitioners and contextual observations to trace the genealogy of curricular indoctrination and identify pathways for pedagogical renewal. Ultimately, this research contributes to broader scholarly conversations on educational decolonization by demonstrating how indigenous philosophies can be operationalized to dismantle hierarchical teaching models, restore children's epistemic agency, and reimagine Christian education as a practice of cultural preservation, theological contextualization, and humanizing liberation (Dei, 2023; Ojwang, 2023; Sheik, 2020).

Methods

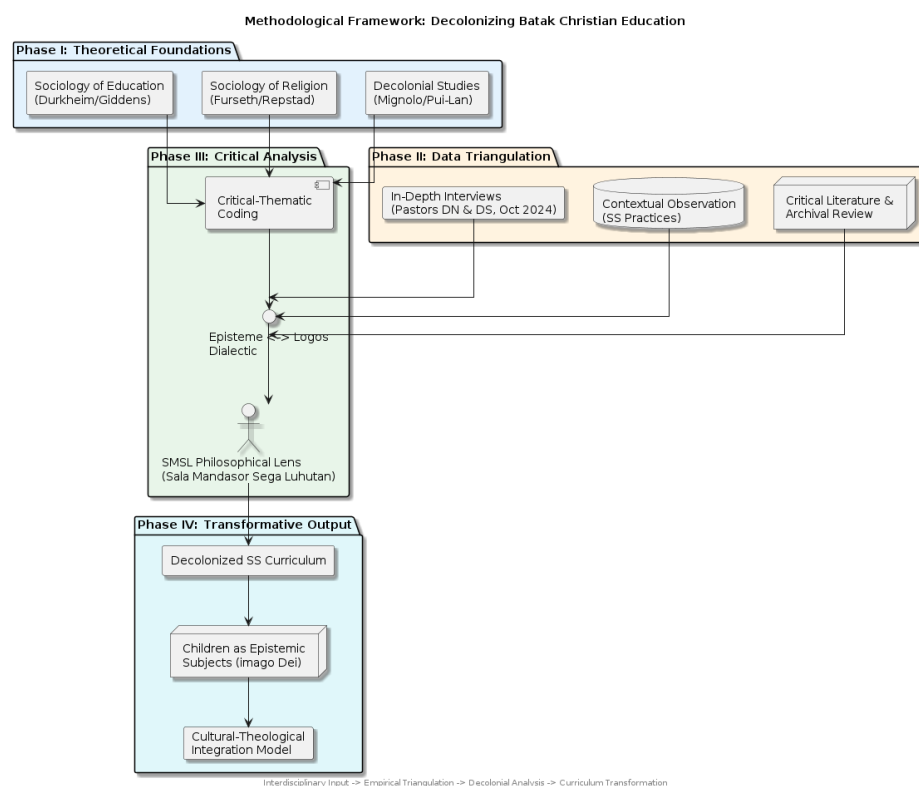


Figure 1. Methodological Framework: Decolonizing Batak Christian Education

This study employed a qualitative case study design with a critical-decolonial orientation to examine the persistence of colonial pedagogical patterns and the position of Batak indigenous knowledge within the Sunday School curriculum of Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI). The study integrated perspectives from the sociology of education, the sociology of religion, and decolonial studies. These perspectives were used to analyse the relationships among

ecclesiastical history, curriculum authority, teaching practices, cultural representation, and the agency of pastors in transforming Christian education.

The research was conducted in two historically significant HKI congregations: HKI Dahlia in Medan City, identified as the first HChB congregation in Medan, and HKI Batu IV in Pematangsiantar, regarded as the historical birthplace of HChB. These locations were selected because of their relevance to the historical development of HChB and HKI and their potential to illustrate the relationship between the church's early decolonial movement and its contemporary educational practices.

Two pastors, referred to by the pseudonyms Rev. DN and Rev. DS, participated in the study. They were selected purposively because of their pastoral responsibilities, knowledge of HKI's institutional history, and involvement in the religious education of children within their respective congregations. The limited number of participants was consistent with the study's focused and exploratory character; therefore, the findings were intended to provide an in-depth contextual interpretation rather than statistical generalization.

Data were collected in October 2024 through semi-structured in-depth interviews, contextual observations, and document analysis. The interviews explored four principal areas: the historical relationship between Batak culture and HKI, the current structure and pedagogical orientation of the Sunday School curriculum, the forms and frequency of cultural integration in Sunday School activities, and the potential role of pastors in developing a culturally grounded curriculum. Particular attention was given to the use of Batak cultural elements, including *manortor*, *ulos*, the Batak language, *gondang* music, *Dalihan Na Tolu*, Batak proverbs, and indigenous oral narratives.

Contextual observations were undertaken to examine how Sunday School teaching was implemented in practice. The observations focused on teaching methods, patterns of interaction between teachers and children, children's opportunities to participate, and whether Batak cultural elements functioned as substantive learning resources or merely as ceremonial and performative components. The observational data were used to contextualize and compare the statements provided by the pastoral participants.

Document analysis included relevant church historical records, the HKI Ordination Agenda, available Sunday School materials, theological texts, and scholarly literature concerning Christian education, Batak culture, postcolonialism, and decolonial pedagogy. Historical documents were used to reconstruct the development of HChB and its transformation into HKI, while curriculum-related and theological documents were examined to identify dominant conceptions of knowledge, authority, culture, children, and Christian formation. Scholarly literature was used primarily to support the critical interpretation of the empirical and historical data rather than to replace the primary evidence.

The data were analysed using a critical thematic analysis. First, interview data, observation notes, and documentary materials were read repeatedly to identify relevant statements and recurring patterns. Second, initial codes were developed around themes such as ecclesiastical resistance, colonial curriculum continuity, cultural performativity, indigenous knowledge exclusion, banking-model pedagogy, children's epistemic position, and pastoral agency. Third, the codes were compared across interviews, observations, and documents and subsequently organized into broader analytical themes. These themes included the historical decolonization of HKI, epistemological tensions in Christian education, the level of Batak cultural integration in Sunday School, and the role of pastors in curriculum transformation.

The interpretation proceeded through three interconnected analytical stages. The first stage involved historical-critical reconstruction of the transition from missionary control to the establishment of HChB and HKI. The second stage examined contemporary Sunday School practices to distinguish ceremonial or tokenistic cultural representation from substantive pedagogical integration. The third stage developed a normative curriculum transformation framework by relating the empirical findings to decolonial pedagogy and the Batak philosophy of *Sala Mandasor Segi Luhutan*. In this study, SMSL was used as an interpretive and reconstructive framework that emphasizes the need to identify problematic educational foundations, dismantle colonial assumptions, and rebuild the curriculum through Batak epistemology, Scripture, dialogical learning, and recognition of children as active subjects bearing the *imago Dei*.

The credibility of the analysis was strengthened through source triangulation by comparing evidence from pastoral interviews, contextual observations, church documents, and relevant scholarship. Interpretive claims were differentiated from direct empirical evidence and supported, where applicable, by participant quotations and documentary information. Participants' identities were protected through the use of pseudonyms, and the data were presented with attention to the cultural and ecclesiastical sensitivity of the research context.

Results and Discussion

Historical Trajectories of Religious Decolonization: The HKI Movement

The emergence of the Hoeria Christen Batak (HChB) on May 1, 1927, marked a watershed moment in the decolonization of Christian religious space in the Batak region. This movement arose from growing awareness among indigenous Batak Christians who recognized their inferiorized position within the missionary-controlled church structure. The founding pastor, Sutan Malu (Rev. Frederik Panggabean), led this decolonial initiative in Pantoan, Batu IV, Pematangsiantar, establishing a church that deliberately incorporated the indigenous kinship system *Dalihan Na Tolu* and boldly reclaimed traditional *gondang* music. These cultural elements had previously been condemned by missionaries as incompatible with Christianity, representing a systematic desacralization of local wisdom. The HChB movement signified that Batak culture had returned to its people and could now serve as a legitimate means to encounter Jesus as revealed in the Four Gospels.

The transformation from HChB to Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI) at the general assembly in Patane, Porsea, on November 16-17, 1946, reflected two significant political and theological considerations. First, the church recognized itself as the first autonomous church in Indonesia, expanding this milestone into a broader Indonesian Christian identity aligned with the national independence declaration of August 17, 1945. Second, the abbreviation 'Ch' was changed to 'K' to conform to standardized Indonesian spelling, demonstrating linguistic decolonization. From a theological perspective, the Word of God constituted the fundamental foundation of HKI and served as its theological responsibility in Gospel proclamation. This historical-critical analysis reveals that HKI pioneered the decolonization of the Christian religious sphere in Indonesia by restoring local epistemes as the basis for resisting Western hegemony.

Despite this pioneering decolonial stance in ecclesiastical structure, the church paradoxically reproduced colonial patterns in its educational curriculum, particularly within Sunday School ministry. The historical momentum of resistance against missionary dominance did not translate into pedagogical transformation, leaving Christian education for children entrenched in Eurocentric frameworks. This contradiction reveals how colonial structures can become crystallized within institutional practices even after formal independence is achieved. The

decolonization of religious space remained incomplete without addressing the educational mechanisms that shape young minds. Consequently, the Sunday School curriculum became a site where colonial authority continued to operate through subtle yet powerful pedagogical practices.

This paradox is empirically evident in contemporary pastoral practices. Despite the historical reclamation of Batak culture in ecclesiastical worship, its integration into children's curriculum remains superficial. As revealed in recent interviews with pastoral practitioners, *"Batak culture is featured during Christmas in SS. The children perform manortor (a traditional Batak dance) wearing ulos (traditional Batak cloth)"* (Rev. DN & Rev. DS, October 2024). This indicates that cultural elements are confined to ceremonial performances rather than being embedded as a substantive pedagogical framework for encountering the divine.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of HChB and HKI Characteristics

Aspect	HChB (1927-1946)	HKI (1946-Present)
Foundational Location	Pantoan, Batu IV, Pematangsiantar	Expanded across North Sumatra
Cultural Integration	Dalihan Na Tolu kinship system, gondang music	Maintained cultural elements but limited to ceremonies
Relationship to Colonial Power	Direct resistance to RMG missionaries	Formal autonomy but educational dependency
Theological Foundation	Local wisdom as means to know Jesus	Word of God as fundamental foundation
Educational Approach	Not systematically documented	Reproduced Western curriculum models
Political Alignment	Local Batak Christian nationalism	Indonesian national identity

The table above illustrates the historical evolution from HChB to HKI, highlighting both continuity and rupture in the church's decolonial praxis. On the one hand, the church sustained its commitment to cultural integration, indigenous identity, and theological autonomy. On the other hand, these achievements were not fully extended into the educational sphere, where Sunday School practices remained underdeveloped and continued to depend largely on Western curricular and pedagogical models. This gap between ecclesiastical independence and pedagogical dependency demonstrates that decolonization is not completed merely through institutional separation from missionary authority. Rather, it is a complex, multi-generational process that requires continuous critical reflection on the structures, assumptions, and forms of knowledge embedded in educational practice. The historical trajectory of HChB and HKI therefore suggests that formal institutional decolonization must be accompanied by deliberate curricular transformation, including the substantive integration of Batak epistemology, cultural values, and contextual teaching approaches. Without such transformation, colonial patterns may persist within education even after political and ecclesiastical autonomy has been achieved.

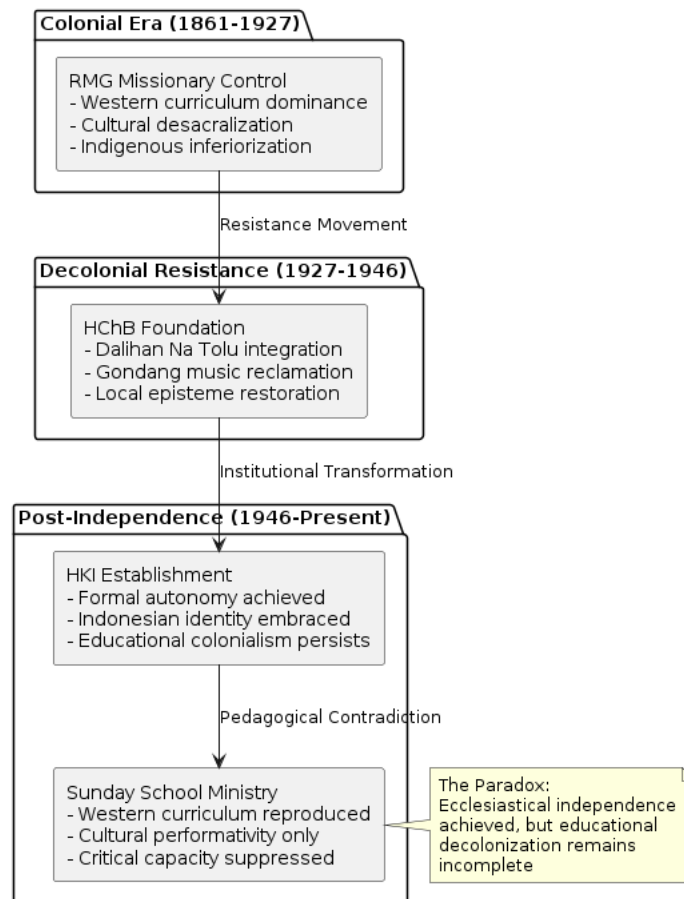


Figure 2. Historical Trajectory of HKI: Decolonization Paradox

Epistemological Tensions: Hebraic versus Hellenistic Pedagogical Traditions

The Christianization of the Batak people introduced a fundamental epistemological tension between symbolic-heuristic and rationalistic-dogmatic approaches to faith formation. The Hebraic tradition, characterized by deep commitment to preserving tradition, faith expression mediated through angelology, and Christological frameworks conveyed through symbols and concrete imagery, resonates closely with Batak cultural epistemology. In contrast, the Hellenistic tradition, distinguished by its appreciation for abstract knowledge and tendency to distance Jesus from his earthly historical identity, became the dominant pedagogical model imposed by Western missionaries. This rationalistic approach stripped sacred cultural symbols of their meaning without presenting the historically grounded identity of Jesus as recorded in the Four Gospels. The Batak cultural community, with its rich symbolic systems and communal memory, resembles the Hebraic model, while missionary-driven Christianization reflected a Hellenistic approach that prioritized doctrinal conformity over contextual embodiment.

The core debate between these traditions revolves around symbolism versus rationalism, with profound implications for how children encounter and internalize faith. When Western missionaries introduced Christianity through rationalistic interpretation without honoring indigenous symbolic systems, they created a disconnect between the Gospel message and the cultural soil in which it was planted. This pedagogical approach failed to connect with the historical reality of Christ as portrayed in the Gospels, instead presenting an abstracted, decontextualized version of Christianity. The result was a form of Christian education that treated Batak culture as inferior and un-Christian, mirroring the very dynamics that

marginalized local knowledge systems in other colonial contexts. Such educational practices suppressed critical capacity and treated learners as passive objects rather than active subjects bearing the *imago Dei*.

Commonalities between the Hebraic and Hellenistic traditions should not be overlooked, as both ultimately point toward salvation and perfection using shared theological language. Both traditions maintain commitment to the oldest Christian creeds, transmit Jewish thought articulating God's self-revelation through Jesus, and sustain a persistent dialectic between truth and the power of Christian faith. However, the missionary imposition of Hellenistic rationality without dialogical engagement with Hebraic symbolism created an imbalanced pedagogical framework. This imbalance prevented the kind of creative synthesis that could have honored both the historical particularity of Jesus as a first-century Jew and the cultural particularity of the Batak people. The absence of this synthesis in Sunday School curriculum continues to hinder authentic faith formation that is both theologically sound and culturally rooted.

Table 2. Hebraic versus Hellenistic Pedagogical Characteristics

Dimension	Hebraic Tradition	Hellenistic Tradition	Batak Cultural Parallel
Knowledge Transmission	Symbolic, narrative, associative	Rational, systematic, abstract	Symbolic, communal, oral
Christological Focus	Historical Jesus, earthly ministry	Exalted Christ, divine nature	Ancestral wisdom embodied
Cultural Orientation	Tradition preservation, ritual	Philosophical inquiry, innovation	Kinship reciprocity
Pedagogical Method	Story, parable, concrete imagery	Doctrine, creed, logical argument	Proverb, dance, music
Authority Source	Torah, covenant, community	Reason, philosophy, individual	Dalihan Na Tolu, elders
Learning Outcome	Faithful practice, identity	Intellectual understanding	Harmonious relationship

The table demonstrates that Batak cultural epistemology aligns more closely with Hebraic pedagogical traditions than with the Hellenistic models imposed by missionaries. This alignment suggests that decolonizing Christian education requires reclaiming symbolic, narrative, and communal approaches to faith formation rather than continuing to privilege abstract, individualistic, and rationalistic methods. The current Sunday School curriculum, dominated by Hellenistic patterns, creates epistemological dissonance for Batak children who must navigate between their cultural heritage and their religious education. Bridging this divide requires intentional pedagogical reconstruction that honors both the historical particularity of Jesus and the cultural particularity of the Batak people.

The urgency of this reconstruction is acknowledged by the pastoral leaders themselves. When asked about the demographic and cultural needs of their congregation, the pastors affirmed: *"Yes, all the SSCs in this church are Batak ethnicity, and it is important to introduce Batak culture to them"* (Rev. DN & Rev. DS, October 2024). This pastoral awareness highlights a critical readiness to embrace the symbolic, communal, and narrative epistemology of the Batak people, provided that the curriculum is decolonized to allow such integration.

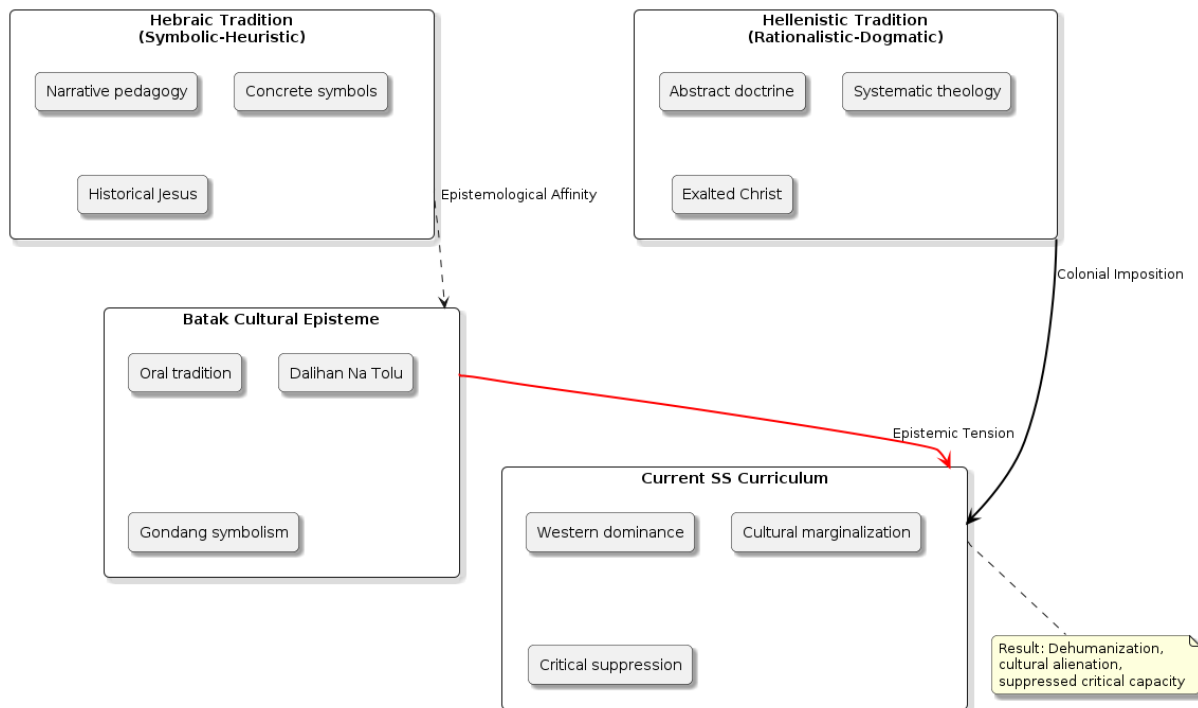


Figure 3. Epistemological Tensions in Batak Christian Education

Table 3. Integration of Batak Cultural Elements in Current Sunday School Practices

Cultural Element	Frequency of Use	Pedagogical Function	Integration Level
Manortor (traditional dance)	Christmas only	Performance/entertainment	Performative
Ulos (traditional cloth)	Special ceremonies	Visual decoration	Symbolic only
Batak language	Minimal	Occasional greetings	Tokenistic
Dalihan Na Tolu values	Not systematically taught	Absent from curriculum	Excluded
Gondang music	Rarely	Background music	Marginalized
Batak proverbs	Not used	Absent from teaching	Excluded
Indigenous narratives	Replaced by Western stories	Not utilized	Suppressed

Empirical observations and pastoral interviews corroborate the data presented in Table 3. The pastors explicitly noted that *"Batak culture is featured during Christmas in SS. The children perform manortor (a traditional Batak dance) wearing ulos (traditional Batak cloth)"* (Rev. DN & Rev. DS, October 2024). This illustrates the superficial nature of cultural integration in current Sunday School practice... (Continue with your original text: *"where elements of Batak culture appear only sporadically..."*).

The table illustrates the superficial nature of cultural integration in current Sunday School practice, where Batak cultural elements appear only sporadically and function primarily as performance rather than pedagogy. This pattern reveals how colonial structures continue to manifest in subtle forms, maintaining the marginalization of indigenous knowledge while

presenting an appearance of cultural sensitivity. The absence of systematic integration means that Sunday School children do not encounter Jesus through their cultural heritage, missing opportunities for authentic faith formation that honors both their identity as Batak people and their calling as Christian disciples. Transforming this pattern requires moving from performative inclusion to substantive curricular reconstruction.

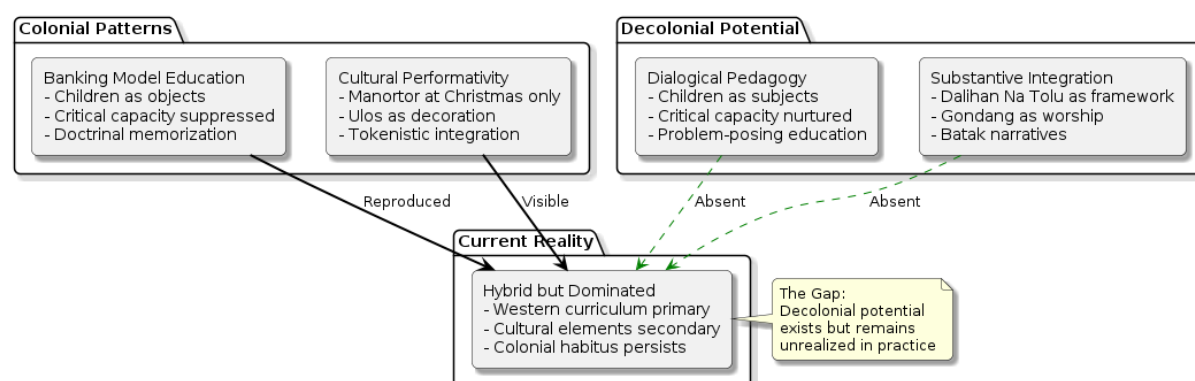


Figure 4. Colonial Legacy in Sunday School Curricula

Pastoral Agency in Curriculum Transformation

Pastors within HKI occupy a strategically critical position as agents capable of either reproducing colonial pedagogical patterns or initiating transformative decolonial praxis. The HKI Ordination Agenda, particularly point IV, mandates pastors to diligently teach and nurture children as Jesus Christ did, preventing all forms of misleading and doctrinal deviation. This ordination charge can be interpreted as a theological imperative to employ local wisdom as a medium for fostering knowledge of Christ, thereby preventing deviation not through cultural suppression but through cultural affirmation. Pastors, functioning as spiritual leaders and educators, possess causal power to influence learners through the educational experiences they design and facilitate. Drawing upon Giddens' framework, pastors as agents can exercise this power either to maintain colonial structures or to dismantle them through intentional pedagogical innovation. The significant number of pastors within HKI represents a powerful asset for decolonizing Christian education if they embrace their vocation as theologians who excavate local narratives and construct contextual theology.

This potential is rooted in their contextual awareness of the learners. Recognizing that *"all the SSCs in this church are Batak ethnicity, and it is important to introduce Batak culture to them"* (Rev. DN & Rev. DS, October 2024), pastors are strategically positioned to transition from mere transmitters of Western doctrine to facilitators of culturally grounded faith formation. By leveraging this awareness... (continue with your original text: *"pastors must engage in continuous theological-critical reflection..."*)

The preventive response to colonial educational patterns requires fostering a paradigm of religious life that is inclusive-pluralistic, multicultural, humanistic, dialogical-persuasive, contextual, and interactive. Within this framework, Batak culture can be redefined as a source of power to achieve this vision and simultaneously serve as a vehicle for decolonizing Christian education. Pastors must engage in continuous theological-critical reflection, moving beyond the unconscious submission to colonial forms that characterized previous generations of church leaders. This requires recognizing that preventing doctrinal deviation does not mean rejecting cultural expression but rather guiding spiritual journeys through culturally grounded pathways that honor the imago Dei in every child. The Batak proverb *"metmet do hau boi sihorsihoron"* (it is in childhood that teaching takes root) underscores the strategic importance

of Sunday School as a platform for pastoral theological contribution. Through intentional integration of Batak episteme, pastors can cultivate Sunday School ministry that matures children in faith while anchoring them in their cultural identity.

The transformation of curriculum as a form of decolonizing Christian education must prioritize indigenous history and culture as both content and practice of teaching. This praxis emerges from reinterpreting the pastoral mandate to guard against doctrinal deviation through the lens of the SMSL philosophy, which demands that flawed foundations be completely dismantled and rebuilt. Pastors acting as agents of transformation must draw upon Batak epistemic values in sustained and continuous ways, resisting the banking model that has entrapped previous generations. For Freire, liberation and faith practices that generate loving resistance are central to a pedagogy of the heart, where God calls for transformation that restores the humanity of both oppressor and oppressed. The decolonization of Batak Christian education, therefore, becomes an embodiment of this pedagogy, with pastors serving as agents of dissemination who challenge domination and Eurocentrism through culturally grounded educational practice.

Table 4. Pastoral Roles in Decolonial Curriculum Transformation

Pastoral Function	Colonial Reproduction	Decolonial Transformation
Teaching Method	Banking model, memorization	Problem-posing, dialogical
Cultural Stance	Suspicion, marginalization	Affirmation, integration
Child Perception	Object to be filled	Subject bearing imago Dei
Knowledge Source	Western theology only	Batak episteme + Scripture
Authority Exercise	Hierarchical dominance	Collaborative partnership
Curriculum Design	Imported Western models	Contextual reconstruction
Doctrinal Guarding	Cultural suppression	Cultural discernment

The table delineates the contrasting pastoral orientations that either perpetuate colonial educational patterns or advance decolonial transformation. Pastors committed to decolonization must consciously reject banking model pedagogy in favor of dialogical approaches that honor children's critical capacity and cultural identity. This shift requires not merely technical curriculum adjustment but fundamental reorientation in how pastors understand their vocation, their relationship to culture, and their responsibility to children. The pastoral mandate to prevent doctrinal deviation must be reinterpreted as a call to cultivate discernment through cultural engagement rather than cultural rejection.

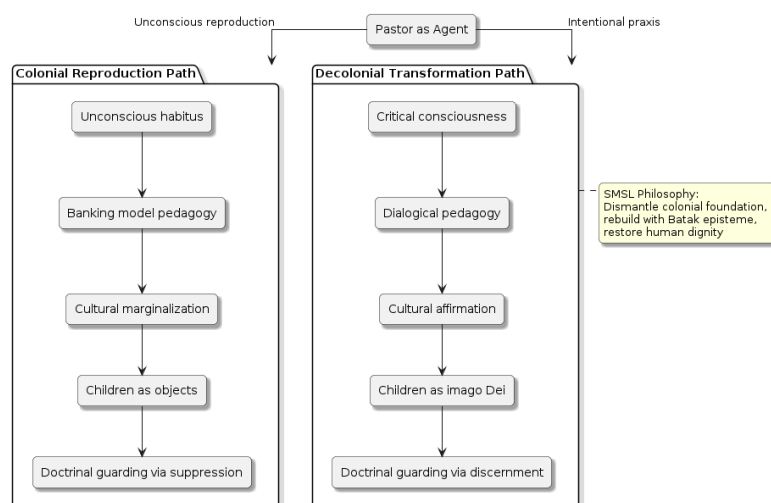


Figure 5. Pastoral Agency: Colonial Reproduction vs Decolonial Transformation

The findings reveal that colonial epistemic structures persist within HKI's Sunday School curriculum, systematically marginalizing Batak indigenous knowledge while privileging Western pedagogical frameworks. This aligns with recent scholarship demonstrating that colonial Christian education continues to operate through subtle mechanisms of epistemic marginalization, wherein local cultural frameworks are disqualified as legitimate sources for theological reflection and faith formation (I. Lattu, 2024; Naidoo et al., 2024; Onyango Ouma, 2025; Pui-lan, 2021; Sakupapa, 2023). Contemporary studies corroborate that despite formal ecclesiastical independence, indigenous congregations often reproduce colonial curricula due to institutionalized habitus that equates Western educational models with authentic Christian identity (Sefa Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024; Shahjahan et al., 2022). Conversely, emerging postcolonial educational research highlights that several Indonesian Christian communities have successfully decoupled doctrinal instruction from colonial pedagogical templates by intentionally embedding indigenous oral traditions into catechetical practices without compromising theological coherence (I. M. Lattu & Husein, 2023). The HKI context, therefore, exemplifies a critical gap between historical decolonial resistance and contemporary pedagogical practice, underscoring the urgent need for intentional curricular intervention that centers Batak knowledge as a valid theological pathway.

The empirical observation that Batak culture appears only during ceremonial occasions, such as Christmas performances, reflects a broader pattern of cultural performativity rather than substantive pedagogical integration. Recent curriculum research identifies this phenomenon as “decolonial tokenism,” where indigenous symbols are displayed ritually but excluded from core instructional design and cognitive faith formation (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Maringe, 2023). This superficial engagement perpetuates what contemporary scholars term epistemic extraction, wherein cultural elements are harvested for aesthetic or celebratory purposes while the underlying knowledge systems remain marginalized in educational praxis (Sapto et al., 2022). Conversely, place-responsive pedagogical models advocate for culturally sustaining curricula that treat indigenous epistemologies as foundational to biblical interpretation, thereby fostering deeper theological contextualization (Bleazby et al., 2023; Gearon et al., 2023). The contrast highlights that HKI's current approach, while well-intentioned, inadvertently reinforces colonial hierarchies by relegating Batak culture to the margins of Sunday School instruction, thereby limiting children's capacity to encounter Christ through their own cultural heritage.

The role of pastors as potential agents of decolonial curriculum transformation is critically underscored by the persistence of banking-model pedagogy that treats Sunday School children as passive recipients rather than active epistemic subjects. Contemporary educational research affirms that decolonizing pedagogy requires educators to consciously dismantle hierarchical teacher-student dynamics and adopt dialogical, problem-posing methodologies that honor learners' critical agency (Morrow, 2022; Shahjahan et al., 2022; Viola, 2022). Within pastoral contexts, recent theological-educational studies emphasize that spiritual leadership must transition from doctrinal gatekeeping to culturally facilitative guidance, wherein local wisdom is intentionally woven into biblical instruction (Wardani et al., 2024). However, contrasting institutional analyses caution that structural constraints, such as denominational curriculum mandates, standardized teacher training, and ecclesiastical risk aversion, often hinder pastors from implementing decolonial practices despite theological willingness (Maringe, 2023; Riyanto, 2025). This tension reveals that while HKI pastors possess the theological mandate to prevent doctrinal deviation through cultural affirmation, their transformative potential remains contingent upon systemic support, decolonial pedagogical training, and intentional curriculum redesign.

The application of the Batak philosophy of *Sala Mandasor Sega Luhutan* (SMSL) as a critical framework for curriculum transformation finds strong resonance in recent indigenous educational scholarship advocating for foundational epistemic restructuring rather than superficial curricular adjustments. Contemporary decolonial theorists argue that effective indigenous curriculum reform requires the complete dismantling of colonial pedagogical architectures before reconstructing learning environments centered on communal values, relational ontologies, and contextualized biblical hermeneutics (Bailey et al., 2019; Miuka & Tufu, 2025). This aligns with SMSL's agrarian metaphor, which mandates that flawed foundations must be entirely rebuilt rather than patched, offering a culturally coherent methodology for HKI's Sunday School transformation. Conversely, some educational policy studies warn that radical deconstruction without institutional scaffolding may provoke ecclesiastical resistance, curriculum fragmentation, or accusations of theological syncretism (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Riyanto, 2025). Nevertheless, integrating SMSL into theological education provides a strategic pathway for HKI to operationalize decolonial praxis, ensuring that curriculum transformation is not merely an academic exercise but a culturally rooted, spiritually grounded movement that restores Batak children's epistemic dignity and theological agency.

Collectively, these findings underscore that decolonizing Batak Christian education requires moving beyond historical commemoration toward active pedagogical praxis that centers indigenous knowledge as a legitimate medium for encountering Christ. Recent scholarship affirms that institutional decolonization is inherently iterative, demanding sustained collaboration between theologians, educators, and indigenous communities to dismantle colonial curricula and reconstruct contextually responsive educational ecosystems (Omodan, 2025; Prest, 2020; Zembylas, 2025). While this study's focus on HKI provides a critical locus for decolonial analysis, it also acknowledges limitations in generalizability, as denominational variations, urban-rural divides, and generational shifts in cultural literacy may influence curriculum transformation trajectories (Lattu, 2024; Maringe, 2023). Future research should therefore employ longitudinal and comparative methodologies to evaluate the impact of indigenous-centered Sunday School curricula on children's theological identity, critical reasoning, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, as HKI approaches its centenary in 2027, embracing SMSL-guided decolonial pedagogy offers not only a corrective to colonial educational legacies but also a transformative vision for Christian education that honors Batak heritage as a sacred pathway to divine encounter.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that while the Huria Kristen Indonesia (HKI) historically pioneered ecclesiastical decolonization in the Batak region, its Sunday School curriculum remains deeply entrenched in colonial pedagogical patterns that systematically marginalize indigenous knowledge and reduce children to passive recipients of Western doctrinal frameworks. The persistent reliance on Eurocentric educational models, coupled with the relegation of Batak cultural expressions to ceremonial performances rather than substantive pedagogical integration, perpetuates epistemic alienation and obscures the full personhood of Sunday School children as bearers of the *imago Dei*. By applying the Batak philosophy of *Sala Mandasor Sega Luhutan* (SMSL) as a critical-deconstructive lens, this research establishes that authentic curriculum transformation requires the complete dismantling of colonial educational foundations and their reconstruction through pedagogical practices that center Batak epistemology as a legitimate, theologically coherent pathway to encountering Christ. As HKI approaches its centenary in 2027, decolonizing Sunday School ministry emerges not merely as an academic or institutional adjustment, but as a theological imperative and a transformative

celebration of indigenous identity, affirming that Christian faith and Batak cultural heritage operate synergistically rather than antagonistically.

To actualize this transformation, HKI leadership, pastoral educators, and denominational curriculum developers must collaboratively redesign Sunday School materials by systematically embedding Batak kinship values, oral narratives, and symbolic traditions into core biblical instruction, thereby transitioning from a hierarchical banking model to a dialogical, problem-posing pedagogy that nurtures children's critical agency and cultural literacy. Denominational authorities should institutionalize mandatory decolonial pedagogy workshops for pastors and Sunday School teachers, equipping them with hermeneutical and instructional tools to practice theological contextualization confidently and without fear of syncretism accusations. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-denominational comparative designs to evaluate the longitudinal impact of indigenous-centered Sunday School curricula on children's spiritual formation, identity integration, and epistemic resilience across diverse Indonesian Christian contexts. Ultimately, sustained collaboration between theologians, indigenous educators, and local congregations will ensure that Batak Christian education evolves into a liberating, culturally rooted practice that honors divine revelation, restores human dignity, and cultivates a generation capable of reflecting Christ through their own heritage.

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