

FROM UNKNOWN TO KNOWN: WANTARRI (GIFT) AND INTERPRETIVE RESPONSIVENESS ACROSS WARLPIRI AND INDONESIAN CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This article argues that shared life across cultural and religious differences is sustained by interpretive and relational responsiveness cultivated in everyday life. Beginning with the Warlpiri philosophic concept of *ngurra-kurlu* (home-having), it reframes pluralism not simply as an abstract framework for identity but as a dynamic field of relations in which meaning, responsibility, and belonging emerge through the circulation of stories, ceremony, and exchange—a movement from “unknown to known” understood as ongoing relational formation. On this view, knowledge is encountered as a *wantarri* (gift) which is received, shared, and renewed in relation.

Placing these concepts in dialogue with the experiences of *Gereja Jemaat Kristus Indonesia* (Churches of Christ in Indonesia) and the Indonesian state ideology of Pancasila, the article considers how plural societies depend not only on formal structures of unity but on interpretive practices that sustain interdependence and shared responsibility. By interposing Indigenous Australian and Indonesian contexts, it approaches theology as a practice of interpretive responsiveness, proposing interpretive generosity and narrative exchange as practices that cultivate relationality and ethical growth within difference.

Keywords

Warlpiri, *ngurra-kurlu*, Pancasila, hermeneutics, narrative, christology

Introduction

It is often remarked that Indonesia is the most populous nation bordering Australia and the world’s most populous Muslim nation. Except for Papua New Guinea, it is also Australia’s closest geographic neighbour. Yet most Australians have little, if anything, to do with Indonesian culture, politics, religion, or people. These remain largely unknown.

The same might be said of Australian Indigenous knowledge and ceremonial

traditions. Although there is broad acknowledgement of, and desire to include, Indigenous perspectives within academic enquiry, appreciation of Indigenous cultural forms and representations rarely become a methodological grounding for scholarship or shape orientations to academic enquiry.¹ Aboriginal cultural practitioners and ceremony leaders largely remain outside the academy.

Yet contemporary Australia and Indonesia abound with diverse people and cultures, many carrying distinct ethical and religious commitments. Working alongside these differences is essential to living in communities oriented toward deeper relational understanding and integrity. With this context in mind, this article begins from a heuristic orientation—learning through encounter and enquiry—asking how philosophical and theological engagement across diverse contexts in Australia and Indonesia might shape common forms of life, consolidating a sense of “home” or togetherness in difference. It argues that *ngurra-kurlu* (home-having),² a Warlpiri philosophic concept from the Tanami Desert, is sustained not primarily through formal frameworks of identity or belief, but through relational practices cultivated with interpretive generosity, narrative exchange, and shared responsibility.

A few years ago, I coordinated and co-taught the theology unit *Culture and Country: Engaging Faith in Contemporary Australian Society* at Stirling Theological College, University of Divinity. The unit addressed indigeneity, multiculturalism, and secularity in Australia, as well as religion and the state ideology of Pancasila in Indonesia, with key content delivered by Indonesian church leader and academic Hery Susanto. My own contribution drew on previous doctoral study with Yolŋu singers and ceremony leaders, collaborative music performance projects, and teaching on Aboriginal music and media with Warlpiri elder Wanta Jampijnpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu. My research is indebted to long-term collaboration and learning with Pawu-Kurlpurlunu and Susanto. Their teaching, cultural leadership, and theological insight have shaped the relational and interpretive approaches explored here. This article presents my own interpretation of those engagements.

Several classes within *Culture and Country* sought to introduce Warlpiri kinship and ceremony as practices that shape belonging and mutual responsibility among different families and homelands. Pawu-Kurlpurlunu has taught these concepts to a wide range of academic, government, and school audiences across Australia for many years, including Aboriginal Christian leaders through Five Stones Leadership,

1 Attending to dynamics of story and community, Indigenous knowledge research in applied disciplines of ethnomusicology, linguistics, and anthropology can readily inform philosophical and theological inquiry in Australia. For example, Samuel Curkpatrick, “Soundings on a Relational Epistemology: Encountering Indigenous Knowledge through Interwoven Experience,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 44, no. 5 (2023): 658–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2023.2192467>.

2 Unless otherwise noted, all italicised non-English words are Warlpiri.

coordinated by Australians Together.³ Most recently, his call for all Australians to “embrace their birthright” and discover a more capacious sense of Australian identity through Warlpiri law, has been extended through the music and film project, *Crown and Country*.⁴

Hery Susanto, Principal of *Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Jemaat Kristus Indonesia* (STTJKI; Churches of Christ Theological College of Indonesia) in Central Java, also gave key lectures in the unit. Susanto has taught in a range of contexts in Indonesia and Australia, exploring Christian responses to Indonesian national discourse on religion and social cohesion. His teaching encourages theological attentiveness to ethical formation in contexts of religious plurality and conflict.

By coincidence, Susanto’s introduction to Pancasila, the foundational ideology of the Republic of Indonesia, followed directly from an overview of Pawu-Kurlpurlunu’s conceptualisation of *ngurra-kurlu*, a pattern for working together in difference grounded in Warlpiri ancestral narratives and law. There are structural similarities between these two frameworks, which are interesting. But more importantly, both share an impetus toward *bhinneka tunggal ika* (Indonesian: “unity in diversity”), an aspiration inscribed as the national motto of Indonesia. Affirming this connection, Pawu-Kurlpurlunu remarked: “Pancasila is Indonesia’s own *ngurra-kurlu*—I believe everyone has their own version of *ngurra-kurlu*.”⁵

This observation is significant because it understands different inheritances—of land, law, language, ceremony, and kin—to be bound together as an interconnected *palka* (body). As academic colleagues working across disciplines and contexts, and as members of nations that are global neighbours, Pawu-Kurlpurlunu’s claim presupposes a common identity—we just need to work out how our relations might be best configured so that our differences work to “become a *wantarri* (gift) to one another”—a key orientation of Warlpiri ceremonial and economic exchange.⁶ As a framework, *ngurra-kurlu* is purposed towards these ends and offers a framework in which distinct inheritances—of culture, land, politics and so on—constitute distinct identities while also offering interpretive processes for meaningful engagement across those differences. Accordingly, this article treats *ngurra-kurlu*, Pancasila and

3 “Five Stones Leadership,” Five Stones Leadership, accessed May 26, 2026, <https://www.fivestones.org.au>.

4 *Crown and Country: A Warlpiri Universe*, produced by Kim Suree Williamson, directed by Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu and Marc (Monkey) Peckham, Lajamanu, Northern Territory, 2025.

5 Samuel Curkpatrick et al., *Symbolic Cohesion and Interpretive Freedom: Embodying Unity in Diversity through Warlpiri Ngurra-Kurlu and Indonesian Pancasila* 37, no. 2 (2023): 243–66, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.26695>.

6 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu and Samuel Curkpatrick, “Gift to One Another: Interpreting Songlines through the Relational Dynamics of *Kuruwarri*,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 44, no. 5 (2023): 760–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2023.2192912>.

Christian theology not primarily as systems to be compared but as interpretive practices that form people in habits of relation.

“Giving Taste” to One Another

Patterns of Indigenous relationality found across Australia can inform deeper engagement with Indigenous peoples, beyond a mere appreciation of cultural forms or information about Indigenous knowledge, bracketed within established discourses. The metaphor of *giving taste*, which resonates with concepts found across Australia, suggests one such approach. It is an ethos in which distinct identities are maintained even as those identities come to give taste to, or enhance the characteristics of, other identities.

Across Indigenous Australia, ceremonial performances celebrate ancestral narratives and homelands as “an ornate patchwork of myriad different countries.”⁷ Different places and the people who care for them are not considered as separate from one another but intricately connected, through ecology, kinship, narrative, and ancestral law. Convergences and divergences in the activities and journeys of ancestral figures structure ongoing responsibilities between groups, including the management of hereditary estates, obligations of marriage, trade, and political processes.

Such interdependencies are also conveyed through generative metaphors that foreground the productive potential of difference. In Yolŋu thought, *ganma* describes the intermingling of saltwater and freshwater, distinct bodies that nevertheless “give taste” to one another—a phrase taken from Morphy and Morphy’s account of Yolŋu ownership of sea and waterways around Blue Mud Bay.⁸ During the dry season, salt seeps up the freshwater rivers from the coast, and at the onset of the wet, heavy rains push fresh water out to sea. While there is constant push-and-pull and seepage between systems, bodies of sea and flood water remain conceptually separate:

The apparent dualism imposed by the contrast “salt” versus “fresh” fails to capture the complexity of the environmental, ecological and mythological relationship between the two. There is a mediating state in the dynamic interrelationship between salt and freshwater—brackish water. This is a potent source of metaphor in Yolngu thought.⁹

Similar metaphors are found in Warlpiri thought and performance, such as

7 Marcia Langton and Aaron Corn, *Law: The Way of the Ancestors* (Thames & Hudson, 2023), 37.

8 Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy, “Tasting the Waters: Discriminating Identities in the Waters of Blue Mud Bay,” *Journal of Material Culture* 11, nos. 1–2 (2006): 67–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183506063012>.

9 Morphy and Morphy, “Tasting the Waters,” 74. Contemporary orthographic conventions replace “Yolngu” with “Yolŋu.”

milpirri, the convergence of hot and cold pressure systems to produce thunderclouds and rain.¹⁰ These generative relations are central to the paradigm of *ngurra-kurlu*.

Sitting in a Melbourne cafe with Pawu-Kurlpurlunu in late 2022, we considered how our distinct identities can complement one another. While difference can provoke disturbance or even conflict, it can also enhance identity and is integral to change. For Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, the creative potential of difference means that cultural traditions should never simply be amalgamated. Rather, *ngurra-kurlu* is a concern with the way ancestral identities let us “shine out” as a gift to others: “That’s your *ngurra-kurlu*, that’s your character.”

All traditions, in this sense, carry interpretive grammars. *Ngurra-kurlu* is one such grammar, holding insights for how different inheritances—of culture, epistemology, and perhaps theology—might work alongside one another. As Pawu-Kurlpurlunu added honey to his tea, I suggested that the identity of one complimented and enhanced the identity of the other; yet the result would be quite different if he were to mix tea with orange juice. The point, he responded, is not to mix everything together in one lukewarm brew. What is enjoyed is the difference—the sweet, tannin flavour of the tea alternating with the citrus zing of the juice.

In this way, difference is to be savoured and can help us understand what is unique about inherited identities. In relation to different peoples and cultures, *ngurra-kurlu* is how:

you give yourself to [others]; they give back to you. In a way, trying to honour you and respect you. You might be orange juice, you might be a cup of tea. You might be the sky, you might be the ground. It doesn’t matter. Try not to mix them cause we like it separate, and [in that way] we will always continue to feed off each other.¹¹

In what follows, I explore these dynamics through the novel interposition of *ngurra-kurlu* with Christian experience in Indonesia, allowing different people and experiences to ‘give taste’ to one another. This approach demonstrates generative possibilities of Warlpiri philosophy that can underpin mutual growth among those who remain distinct.

10 Aaron Corn and Wanta Jampijinpa Patrick, “Pulyaranyi: New Educational Contexts for Transferring Warlpiri Knowledge,” *UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts* 4, no. 2 (2015): 1–27. See also Denise Champion, *Anaditj* (Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, 2021).

11 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu and Samuel Curkpatrick, *Juice and Tea: Ngurra-Kurlu in Melbourne with Prof. Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu*, directed by Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu and Samuel Curkpatrick, National Indigenous Television (NITV), December 10, 2022, 3:28, <https://ictv.com.au/video/item/11118>.

Ngurra-Kurlu: From Framework to Interpretive Practice

The ethos of “giving taste to one another” resonates deeply with Warlpiri understandings of *ngurra-kurlu*, a philosophical orientation widely discussed as a set of organising principles for Warlpiri education, governance, and social relations.¹² Existing literature has focused on *ngurra-kurlu* as a conceptual schema structuring responsibilities and relations across five domains of land (*walya*), law (*kuruwarri*), ceremony (*manyuwana*), language (*jaru*), and kin (*warlalja*). While important, this focus can overlook interpretive dynamics that shape community and narrative interpretation. Approaching *ngurra-kurlu* through the ceremonial theme of *wantarri* (gift) shifts attention from framework to interaction: it is through patterns of interpretive generosity, narrative exchange, and shared responsibility that difference becomes formative of togetherness.

The five domains of *ngurra-kurlu* are read from the five stars of the Southern Cross and provide a comprehensive frame of reference through which Warlpiri identity is formed and aspirations for a healthy and productive society are articulated.¹³ Through *ngurra-kurlu*, one “has a home” that is associated with distinct inheritances of land, ceremony, and law, yet which is always implicated in the lives and inheritances of others. Pawu-Kurlpurlunu explains, “It’s not enough to know *about* your country; you have to understand how it fits in—how it’s located—as a place in the dreaming and in the songline.”¹⁴

Interpreting Stories, Growing as a Community

As well as shaping kinship obligations and custodianship of land and story, the relational dynamics of *ngurra-kurlu* underpin hermeneutic activity. For Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, interpretation of ancestral stories and songs is always oriented toward relational formation as a diverse community: teaching begins by asking *why* particular relations are “written in creation,” and how distinct histories and stories are held together within a living *palka* (body) or “existence.”¹⁵ By learning, performing and asking questions of inherited stories and songs, Warlpiri discover

12 For various expositions of *ngurra-kurlu*, see Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu et al., *Ngurra-Kurlu: A Way of Working with Warlpiri People* (Desert Knowledge CRC, 2008); Corn and Patrick, “Pulyaranyi”; Miles C. C. Holmes and Wanta (Stephen Patrick) Jampijinpa, “Law for Country: The Structure of Warlpiri Ecological Knowledge and Its Application to Natural Resource Management and Ecosystem Stewardship,” *Ecology and Society* 18, no. 3 (2013): 19, <https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-05537-180319>; Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, “Milpirri: Performance as a Bridge That Joins the Ancient with the Modern,” *Ngoonjook*, no. 33 (2008): 53–60.

13 Samuel Curkpatrick et al., “Creative Responsibility: Shaping Purposeful Communities through Ceremonial Performance,” in *Varieties of Imagination, Creativity and Wellbeing in Australia*, ed. Peter Otto et al. (Unlikely, 2025).

14 Pawu and Curkpatrick, “Gift to One Another.”

15 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, personal communication, December 1, 2025.

intricate connections to other people and places that were previously unknown:

Sharing comes through your ceremony. It's a way of learning from each other. That's why we have Jardiwampa, so everyone can learn from each other. If you come into a group that's singing a song, you have to hold a shield or a boomerang over your head to show respect to that mob, because you want to feed off them. So, it's like coming to a dinner table: when you learn knowledge, you're actually feeding on it.¹⁶

These dynamics of respect, sharing, and growth are expressed in the concept of *wantarri*: "Each one of our lives is a gift to each other, as is everything around us, and through this understanding we can better achieve the balance of *ngurra-kurlu* in our lives."¹⁷ As an ethical concept or virtue, *wantarri* is sustained through the storied connections of *wantarri-tarri* (travelling or travelling route), a "gift road" of exchange that forms a complex network of relations across the Australian continent. *Wantarri-tarri* connects diverse groups and places through interactions of governance and diplomacy, economic exchange, and social relations. Songlines that extend from coast to coast join many language groups between. Ceremonial performance is not only an activity that sustains these connections through generations but a site of heuristic enquiry considered essential to the formation of responsible individuals.

The generative character of this interpretive circulation becomes clearer in cross-regional songline exchange, such as relations between Warlpiri and Martu narratives of the ancestral emu, Karna-nganja. The following relates some of our discussion of this story.

Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu: Martu in Western Australia, they have a similar song to our Warlpiri songs. Even though some of the songs have the same story line, they mention different things. We Warlpiri only tell of the emu being scared of something—that's about it. But if you look at those Martu stories, there is a dog in there, chasing the emu. The Warlpiri story doesn't actually tell us that. Why is this important? Why did they come up with that, those *walya-jarra*, the ancestors? If that's the songline, what's the reason behind it? They start the story in one song, and they show where it is going in another language group's song.

Samuel Curkpatrick: When you gather for ceremony, you ask *why* these stories have been remembered and retold in this way, or why certain details

16 Cited in Curkpatrick, "Creative Responsibility"; see also Georgia Curran, "Waiting for Jardiwampa: History and Mediation in Warlpiri Fire Ceremonies," *Oceania* 89, no. 1 (2019): 20–35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ocea.5211>.

17 Wanta Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, "Pulya-Ranyi: Winds of Change," *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 1 (2015): 121–31, <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v21i1.4420>.

have been omitted.

W: We are tracking this trading route between people. Every story is like that: leaving you with questions you have to ask. That's the wantarri-tarri, the "gift road."

S: These stories carry history. They allow these meanings and connections to be carried through many generations.

W: Yeah, that's it. So that mystery is confirmed—why the ancestors did that.¹⁸

At first glance, the claim that "mystery is confirmed" might sound like a resolution, as though meaning had been settled and secured: Jukurrpa history¹⁹ is repeated and "confirmed." Yet within Warlpiri philosophy, what is given in Jukurrpa is also generative. Pawu-Kurlpurlunu is careful with his words. "Mystery is confirmed" carries a double sense: meaning is indeed revealed, partially and contextually, while mystery also remains. Jukurrpa is encountered as gift, in the excess of meanings and connections that extend through ancestral songs, and which invite continued attention, responsibility, learning, and creativity.²⁰

Approached in this way, mystery provides an impetus to growth. Interpretation does not culminate in singular explanations but deepens meaning through the extension of responsibility across relations. This gives interpretive work a character of humility and a responsibility to nurture others through whom one's own inheritances are more fully understood.

These dynamics also shape practices of communication and ethical responsiveness, in which narrative is oriented toward relational understanding among those who are gathered.²¹ To ask what was pursuing the emu through Warlpiri country, for example, requires consultation with senior Martu people, who retain rights to that

18 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, interview with Samuel Curkpatrick, May 1, 2022.

19 Jukurrpa is often translated as "Dreamtime." Pawu-Kurlpurlunu gives the following definition: "Jukurrpa is being shaped into ways of living according to the land. Jukurrpa stories remind us to do the right thing because those stories are not coming from man, they are coming from the country itself. We say country will shape you into being who you are supposed to be." Interview with Samuel Curkpatrick, May 15, 2026.

20 Aesthetic, social, and phenomenological aspects of excess have been explored in Yolŋu ceremony, in Samuel Curkpatrick and Daniel Wilfred, "Shimmering Brilliance: A Yolŋu Aesthetic of Creativity and Collaboration," in *Australasian Music at Home and Abroad*, edited by John Gabriel and Sarah Kirby (Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2023); Samuel Curkpatrick, *Singing Bones* (Sydney University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.30722/sup.9781743326770>.

21 Cataldi comments that the selection of stories and places in storytelling focus on the convergence and divergence of ancestral tracks among those gathered. These connections are appropriately identified in the performance of story, in relation to the levels of knowledge held by those present and the ceremonial context. Peggy Rockman Napaljarri and Lee Cataldi, *Warlpiri Dreamings and Histories: Yimikirli*, The Sacred Literature Series (Harper Collins, 1994), 103.

part of the narrative and its associated performances. Stories are told not as detached accounts but as invitations into a shared interpretive process, through which family, neighbours, and guests are brought into relation, community is formed, and ways of living with others are learned.

Gracious Engagement with Neighbours in Indonesia

These interpretive dynamics also extend beyond Warlpiri contexts. If Warlpiri interpretation is sustained by gift of different inheritances, rather than the synthesis of different stories and traditions, then forms of relation may emerge across regions that hold these differences together without requiring sameness. What travels, in this sense, is not *ngurra-kurlu* itself as a Warlpiri system, but a disposition toward interpretation that opens relational possibility. Pawu-Kurlpurlunu's recognition of Pancasila as "Indonesia's own *ngurra-kurlu*" suggests resonances in approaches to relational growth within plurality.

In what follows, I explore a question central to becoming better neighbours with one another, both within multicultural Australia and across our global neighbourhood: How might *ngurra-kurlu* engage with other plural frameworks that also seek to sustain unity within diversity? Framed in Pawu-Kurlpurlunu's terms, the question becomes: "How does your *ngurra-kurlu* learn with that other *ngurra-kurlu*?" This question is taken up through the lived experience of Indonesian Christians under Pancasila. I argue that Pancasila, like *ngurra-kurlu*, depends on the cultivation of interpretive virtues—qualities of generosity, mutuality, and nurture—if its vision of a flourishing society is to be sustained in practice. This heuristic engagement opens space for recognising emergent connections and shared ethical work across difference.

An Overview of Pancasila

Pancasila, the foundational ideology of the Republic of Indonesia, is similar to *ngurra-kurlu* in that it contains *panca* (five) *sila* (principles, from Sanskrit) considered necessary to a flourishing society. These can be translated as *belief in one divinity* (considered essential to a harmonious society), *a just and civilised humanity, the unity of Indonesia, democracy led by inner wisdom and deliberation, and social justice*.²² Undergoing a recent resurgence of support, especially within civic education,²³ Pancasila aspires to *bhinneka tunggal ika* (unity in diversity), an

22 These principles were originally articulated by President Soekarno on June 1, 1945, two months before Indonesian independence, in a speech to the *Badan Penyelidik Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan* ("Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Independence" BPUPB) and finalised in the Preamble to the Indonesian Constitution (*Indonesia's Constitution of 1945, Reinstated in 1959, with Amendments through 2002*).

23 See Eny Kusdarini et al., "The Implementation of Pancasila Education through Fieldwork Learning Model," *Jurnal Cakrawala Pendidikan* 39, no. 2 (2020): 359–69, <https://doi.org/10.21831/>

ideal proclaimed as the Indonesian national motto—this, in an archipelago nation that spans 17,500 islands from Aceh to Papua, encompassing 1,340 ethnic groups, and over 800 languages.

By comparing constituent elements within *ngurra-kurlu* and Pancasila, we can observe similarities and differences between these systems. For instance, the fourth principle of Pancasila, *democracy led by inner wisdom and deliberation*, relates to *ngurra-kurlu* as a pattern for negotiation and consensus, in which no one voice is more important than any other. However, overplaying such similarities, especially as they are depicted in representational forms, can seem naive. That there are five elements in both *ngurra-kurlu* and Pancasila is arbitrary: for Indonesians, the five pillars of Islam provide an archetype and Pancasila emerged through the formation of a modern nation state; *ngurra-kurlu* is intimately tied to the custodianship of hereditary estates, stories, and songs.

That these discourses represent disparate histories and perspectives suggest that more than comparison is required to generate understanding and relationship. Here, Christian experience provides a tangible starting point to consider the limitations of Pancasila as a system, and the need for an interpretive disposition akin to *wantarri* for its vision of unity and tolerance to be realised.

Challenges of Pluralism and Organicism for Indonesian Christians

President Suharto famously claimed that “Pancasila is an outlook on life, the basis of the state and as an ideology guarantees tolerance and the vitality of all religions.”²⁴ While Pancasila provides a powerful symbolic and constitutional framework for unity in diversity, its capacity to sustain social cohesion depends on how its principles are interpreted and enacted in everyday life.

The limits of Pancasila as a unifying framework become most visible in relation to concerns of pluralism and organicism. These concepts emerged in the post-1965 period under President Suharto’s New Order (1966–98) and continue to inform prevailing interpretations of Pancasila. In the context of perceived threats to social cohesion and the desire to inculcate moral behaviour through religion, pluralism in practice has often meant formal affiliation with one of six state-recognised religions,

[cp.v39i2.31412](#); Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, “President Jokowi: Pancasila Day, Momentum to Actualize Pancasila Values,” June 1, 2018, <https://setkab.go.id/en/president-jokowi-pancasila-day-momentum-to-actualize-pancasila-values/>; Satrio Abdurrachman, “Indonesia’s Obsession with Ideology: The Case of the Pancasila Bill,” Indonesia at Melbourne, July 13, 2020, <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/indonesias-obsession-with-ideology-the-case-of-the-pancasila-bill/>; Nurul Fitri Ramadhani, “Pledges for Pancasila Renewed as Bigotry Haunts Nation,” The Jakarta Post, June 1, 2017, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/06/01/pledges-for-pancasila-renewed-as-bigotry-haunts-nation.html>.

24 Ken Ward, “Soeharto’s Javanese Pancasila,” in *Soeharto’s New Order and Its Legacy: Essays in Honour of Harold Crouch* (ANU E Press, 2010), 32.

inscribed on every adult's identity card.²⁵ Pluralism authorises religious difference through state recognition and bureaucratic management.

Pluralism is complemented by organicism, defined by Indonesia's first Minister of Justice, Supomo, as prioritising the needs of society conceived as an integrated whole rather than the interests of particular groups.²⁶ Here, the state is imagined as an extension of the order, harmony, and hierarchy found in family life and village society, with religious commitment interpreted primarily through its contribution to social stability and moral conduct.²⁷ Organicism appeals to shared moral traditions—such as *gotong royong* (Indonesian: mutual assistance), *musyawarah* (deliberation), and *musufakat* (consensus)—to cultivate social harmony amid religious and cultural diversity.

For Indonesian Christians as a religious minority, discourses of pluralism and organicism exert significant influence, shaping not only how faith is publicly recognised but also how Christian identity and practice is understood as a distinct witness within society. Under pluralism, religious identity is often reduced to nominal affiliation, inherited rather than formed through sustained interpretive engagement. In such a context, affiliation to religion may appear superficial, vulnerable to populist or radical interpretation, and ill-equipped to support mature ethical dialogue across difference.²⁸ Organicism, meanwhile, tends to absorb religious commitment into cultural norms of appropriate behaviour, reinforcing a view of religion as inseparable from tradition and social conformity.²⁹

These dynamics can inadvertently exacerbate social tension. As Van Klinken observes in relation to the Ambon unrest of 2007, conflict frequently emerges not from religious disagreements between Christians and Muslims but from more “worldly” concerns to do with corruption, nepotism, and political alliance.³⁰ These concerns become entrenched along religious lines. Pluralism can also frame

25 These are Islam, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, but not traditional religions. See Victor Imanuel W. Nalle, “The Politics of Intolerant Laws against Adherents of Indigenous Beliefs or *Aliran Kepercayaan* in Indonesia,” *Asian Journal of Law and Society* 8, no. 3 (2021): 558–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/als.2020.54>.

26 Barry Turner, “Nasution: Total People's Resistance and Organicist Thinking in Indonesia” (PhD Thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, 2005), 8, <https://researchbank.swinburne.edu.au/file/23b9333d-f831-441b-8c7e-97be4b1b9061/1/Barry%20Turner%20Thesis.pdf>.

27 David Bouchier, “Organicism in Indonesian Political Thought,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*, edited by Leigh K. Jenco et al. (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190253752.013.39>.

28 Hery Susanto, “Pancasila as the Religious and Social Framework of Indonesia,” *Reo: A Journal of Theology and Ministry* 25, no. 2 (2019).

29 Susanto, “Pancasila.”

30 Gerry van Klinken, “What Caused the Ambon Violence?,” *Inside Indonesia*, September 11, 2011, <https://www.insideindonesia.org/what-caused-the-ambon-violence>.

religious identity competitively. As Esposito notes, some Muslim activists argue that Pancasila facilitates conversion to Christianity and fails to give Islam sufficient prominence within national ideology.³¹ Such perceptions continue to fuel localised conflicts, including resistance to church construction, Christian social initiatives, and intrafamilial tensions following religious conversion.³²

Because pluralism and organicism both risk essentialising religious difference at a cultural and structural level, engagement across these differences often lacks any capacious sense of encounter or exchange. Difference is recognised and managed but rarely interpreted or allowed to reshape relationships. This dynamic is also evident in the state's treatment of many Indigenous groups which struggle for political recognition and which are often defined primarily via their cultural heritage.³³ What is missing in the pluralist and organicist discourses is an appreciation of interpretive dispositions that underpin structural and practical cohesion. It is precisely here that the distinct practices of Christian faith might contribute something valuable. More than nominal affiliation or cultural morality, Christian experience in Indonesia reveals habits of encounter capable of nurturing social cohesion.

Churches of Christ in Indonesia: Seasoning Pancasila

Many Christians embrace Pancasila as a form of divine grace and opportunity to live out their faith freely within contemporary Indonesia.³⁴ However, rather than asserting a protected space within the nation through legislation or institutional influence, many Christian communities embody Pancasila through everyday practices of peacebuilding, service, and relational presence. An example of this is the theological and ministry formation of leaders within Gereja Jemaat Kristus Indonesia (GJKI; Churches of Christ in Indonesia). Leadership within GJKI encourages gracious engagement with neighbours, characterised by relational and interpretive maturity. This demonstrates a distinct Christian *rasa* (Indonesian: taste, seasoning) that enhances the values of Pancasila in everyday life.

The theological ethos of the Restoration or Stone-Campbell Movement, which developed in Indonesia in the permissive atmosphere of the 1960s to 1970s through

31 "Pancasila," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford University Press, 2003), 243.

32 Melissa Crouch, *Law and Religion in Indonesia: Conflict and the Courts in West Java* (Routledge, 2013).

33 Samuel Curkpatrick and Hery Susanto, "Indigenous Knowledge as Interpretive Practice: Gotong Royong and Religious Pluralism in Contemporary Indonesia," *Melbourne Asia Review* 25 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.37839/mar2652-550x25.18>; Affaf Mujahidah, "Sacred and Silenced: How Indigenous Beliefs Struggle for Space in Indonesia," *Melbourne Asia Review* 2025, no. 23 (2025), <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/sacred-and-silenced-how-indigenous-beliefs-struggle-for-space-in-indonesia/>.

34 Pawu and Curkpatrick, "Gift to One Another."

networks of house churches, explains several reasons why GJKI can act flexibly in plural settings.³⁵ Where other Christian denominations seek to codify institutional relations with the state through formal doctrine, such as the *Tata Dasar* (Rules and By-laws) of the National Council of Churches in Indonesia,³⁶ GJKI focuses on embedded relations within communities, social enterprise, and ministry, enabling interpretive freedom and local theological reflection. This formation prioritises unity in Christ as lived practice rather than creed, requiring a high degree of relational maturity to work alongside diverse identities and views.

Hery Susanto oversees practical ministry formation in diverse cultural, religious, and political contexts. Located in Salatiga, Central Java, four-fifths of students at STTJKI come from outside of Java. Susanto's approach is to encourage students to *bring peace* to their various neighbourhoods by fostering *gotong royong* (Indonesian: mutual assistance) through service to those in need and developing relationships with those who are different: "In accordance with Indonesia's basic principle, namely Pancasila, a tolerant human life must be maintained. In this case, learners are challenged to be able to think, collaborate, and reconstruct understanding and knowledge of the plurality of cultures, religions, tribes, from the perspective of Jesus' teachings."³⁷

The Indonesian context encourages a view of faith that prioritises attitudes of tolerance. "Love, care and responsibility" are essential characteristics of human relationality through which we come to know God.³⁸ For Susanto, this begins with the view that Jesus "taught life" rather than "religion"—especially not a "competitive" religion that seeks influence.³⁹ Christian faith is figured through real, relational

35 Initially, the growth of this association was led by an increase in the numbers of house churches across communities in rural Java, cities in Central Java and East Java, and among Chinese Indonesians in Bandung, West Java. GJKI officially registered with the Indonesian government in March 9, 1978. Two theological colleges at Salatiga (STJKI) and Bandung (API) have become centres of cooperative activity providing education and ministry formation, connecting widely with diverse communities across the archipelago and especially in rural areas. Today, GJKI consists of some 234 churches and 7000 members, with a presence in 27 of Indonesia's 37 provinces. See also Gereja Jemaat Kristus Indonesia, "Gereja Jemaat Kristus Indonesia (Indonesian Churches of Christ): On a Journey: A Brief Review," trans. Kevin Tanan, Gereja Jemaat Kristus Indonesia, 2019.

36 Karel A. Steenbrink and Jan S. Aritonang, eds., *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, Studies in Christian Mission, v. 35 (Brill, 2008), 780–83.

37 Hery Susanto, "Tinjauan Teologis Tentang Pendidikan Kristiani Multikultural [A Theological Appraisal of Multicultural Christian Education]," *EDULEAD: Journal of Christian Education and Leadership* 2, no. 1 (2021): 5; Samuel Curkpatrick and Hery Susanto, "Indigenous Knowledge as Interpretive Practice."

38 Susanto, "Pendidikan Kristiani Multikultural," 9. Susanto understands this ethos also to extend from indigenous Javanese traditions: "In Javanese culture, the harmony of human relations is an expression of their faith in *Gusti* or 'the Lord' they believe in." Susanto, "Konsep Pengampunan," 131.

39 Susanto, "Pendidikan Kristiani Multikultural," 2.

contexts, and not by the circumscriptions of religious tradition, doctrine or ritual; the church is a “centripetal movement” which extends from Christ as the centre.⁴⁰

Subsequently, theology is not the description of Christian belief and identity, but grappling with faith as a living expression, in the way “the quality” of one’s faith has a “real impact on society.”⁴¹ Christian communities throughout Indonesia commit to a living faith among neighbours, by visiting the sick in hospital, cleaning the streets, providing tutoring and education, installing sources of safe drinking water, developing sustainable agricultural businesses and other enterprises, and even assisting in the construction of mosques. This manifests God’s character in everyday life and, for Susanto, can “transcend the religiosity of human culture” and attempts to demarcate God within religious spaces.⁴² Susanto writes:

Evangelism is carried out as an effort to explore together a belief or faith within the framework of praxis within society. Specifically, in Indonesia, diversity is not considered an antithesis [to one’s beliefs], but a distinctive treasure within the frame of Pancasila. Mutual respect must be maintained as one large plural Indonesian community.⁴³

Susanto’s ethos, characteristic of GJKI, reveals Christian identity as christological grace in the midst of life. Rather than seeking to claim Christian space within Indonesian pluralism, Susanto encourages others to live with generosity, even in the face of hostility. By “becoming salt and light,” Susanto explains, Christian communities provide seasoning to Indonesian Pancasila, giving those communities a distinct purpose, identity, and *rasa* within contemporary Indonesia.

Becoming Companions: Theology as Interpretive Practice

Rather than approaching *ngurra-kurlu* and Pancasila as frameworks that organise social cohesion or manage diversity, this article has focused on the interpretive and relational practices that sustain them. In both cases, belonging and purpose emerge through encounter and exchange, and a deeper sense of self-in-relation.

This orientation suggests that what sustains plural cultural and religious life is not simply a philosophic or political system that contains difference, but responsiveness to difference as gift—something received, shared, and renewed in relation. Such

40 Hery Susanto, “Gereja Yang Berfokus Pada Gerakan Misioner [A Church Focussed on Missionary Movements],” *FIDEI: Jurnal Teologi Sistematika Dan Praktika* 2, no. 1 (2019): 78, <https://doi.org/10.34081/fidei.v2i1.23>.

41 Susanto, “Gerakan Misioner,” 82.

42 Susanto, “Pendidikan Kristiani Multikultural,” 13.

43 Hery Susanto, “Tinjauan Teologis Tentang Penginjilan Dalam Konteks Indonesia [A Theological Appraisal of Evangelism in the Context of Indonesia],” *Sagacity: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 1, no. 2 (2021): 56–64.

responsiveness also shapes interpretive processes that, through the circulation and exchange of stories, experiences, and personalities, inculcates growth—a movement from “unknown to known.” Approached in this way, cross-cultural understanding or indeed theology need not aim at explanation or synthesis of difference but instead seek to cultivate interpretive maturity and the capacity to recognise and assume shared responsibilities.

For Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, the character of *wantarri* furnishes interpretation with its own momentum: life is energised when differences are worked through together, as gift. “That’s the fun side of learning—both sides, thinking about how it fits together. To understand *kardiya* [non-Aboriginal] teaching through my *yapa* [Aboriginal] teaching; you have to learn to become this country.”⁴⁴ Likewise, for Sustanto, “relational characteristics in Christian education” are “absolutely necessary for each individual to be able to respect and trust one another for mutual growth.”⁴⁵

As the quality that sustains encounter and exchange, *wantarri* binds people, places and generations into patterns of interdependence. What is received as gift becomes the means of nourishing others. The wellbeing of the whole (*palka*) depends on the continued circulation of stories, songs, and people across regions—like nutrients moving through the veins of the kangaroo.⁴⁶ Where this circulation is sustained, life flourishes.

Placed alongside the experience of Indonesian Christians, *ngurra-kurlu* offers a mode of interpretation that draws out the complimentary flavours of different contexts, while clarifying their distinctiveness. Similarly, for Susanto, Christian faith is not secured through institutional boundaries or leverage but enlivened through participation in common life: assisting, teaching, repairing, building, and peacemaking. The church appears less as an organisation than as a body whose health depends on the quality of its relations. Pluralism, in this sense, is an ordinary condition of human experience, within which a distinctive witness of grace takes shape.

These accounts from Australia and Indonesia suggest that theology might be productively approached as a heuristic and relational practice. Theology need not synthesise or resolve differences of country and culture but work through them, forming habits of interpretation by which communities learn to live responsively with one another. Asking how the interpretive grammar of one tradition holds insights for another can reveal an inexhaustible excess of meaning encountered as gift,

44 Wanta Jampijinpa Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, interview with Samuel Curkpatrick and Sarah Bacaller, February 1, 2022.

45 Susanto, “Tinjauan Teologis,” 9.

46 Pawu-Kurlpurlunu, “Cooking the Kangaroo.”

inviting continued attention, responsibility, learning, and creativity. Characterised by receptivity to the unknown, theology becomes a practice of responsive living within difference, recognising it as the generative condition of shared life—a movement from unknown to known.

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