

# Restoring Parents' Role: Tongkonan-Based Education in Toraja Christian Families

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## Abstract

Education is essential for the progress of a region and a nation. In Indonesia, particularly in Tana Toraja, education is still a trending topic, so the government has made it one of its main programs, marked by the construction of schools, facilities that are starting to improve, and educators who are becoming more skilled with more advanced and contextual educational concepts. However, this situation seems to justify parents' decision to entrust the entire responsibility of education to schools. This study aims to restore the primary role of Christian educators, namely parents, by analyzing the concept of education in the Tongkonan culture. This study used qualitative research with descriptive analysis of findings through literature review and interviews. The study's results indicate that the concept of education in Tongkonan, based on the independent curriculum, can restore the natural role of educators in Christian families in Toraja. Parents act as teachers, communicators of norms, teachers of life values, and teachers of symbolic meanings, which are then elaborated in teaching principles, processes, and practices.

**Keywords:** Primary educators, family education, *Tongkonan*, Christian education, parents' role

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## **Introduction**

The advancement of education is a struggle for every country. This is because education is considered very important for developing a nation. Indonesia, in particular, has taken various measures to improve the quality of education, one of which is refining the curriculum from time to time to respond to the challenges of the times. (Indana, 2018; Siregar et al., 2020). In education in Tana Toraja, the national curriculum is always adapted to the local culture. One cultural value that has the potential to be developed in the Merdeka Curriculum is the cultural value of Tongkonan. This value is not only an abstract concept, but also a daily practice that can be used as a reference for achieving educational goals in Tana Toraja.

The role of parents as primary educators was highlighted by Martin Luther during the reformation. Martin Luther explained that parents are crucial in supporting their children's schooling. Martin Luther's understanding emphasizes that parents need to be a source of motivation for their children to pursue formal education at school (Boehlke, 2013). In addition, the book of Deuteronomy clearly states that the task of educating children must be carried out by parents (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and that parents must teach the commandments to instill love for God in various ways (Salu, 2022; Wagiu, 2020; Wenas & Darmawan, 2017). In line with Martin Luther's words and based on Christian teachings about parents as educators, the Tongkonan culture in Tana Toraja also plays an important role in implementing Christian education in families. Culture is a set of attitudes, behaviors, and symbols that people share and usually pass down from generation to generation (Sarwono, 2016, p. 3). This cultural communication process provides educational values for future generations to uphold in an ever-changing world.

The Toraja people are born in Tongkonan and grow up in Tongkonan. The Tongkonan is a source of wisdom and cultural and moral knowledge for the Toraja people. In this sense, the Tongkonan reflects the Toraja people's worldview about the divine, to one another, and the natural world. Through *aluk-ada'* and *pemali*, the ancestors of the Toraja people explain the divine (transcendent) and human (immanent) dimensions (Natty SX, 2025). Tongkonan comes from the word *tongkon*, which means to sit, to be present at a ceremony. Tongkonan is the residence or family home of the Toraja tribe, which has a special position and is built with various symbolic meanings and symbols of Toraja life (Bottong, 2017).

Tongkonan is a place to preserve and maintain Toraja culture. It is also where the values of life that each generation must develop are taught. Parents are responsible for passing down these values to their children. There are three rooms in a Tongkonan, each with its own function. The north room, or *paluang*, is for grandparents, adults, and guests. The central room, known as the *sali*, is for those who have passed away (they are placed there during funeral ceremonies). The southern room, the *sumbung*, serves as a sleeping area for parents and children. It is in the *sumbung* where parents typically educate their children. The education provided may involve introducing the values upheld in the Tongkonan through stories or explaining generally understood symbols.

Educating children today is not easy, so innovation is needed to make it easier for them to understand what they are being taught. The national curriculum for 2024 introduces the concept of independent learning. Researchers believe that the concept of independent learning in the Tongkonan culture is highly relevant in activating parents as primary educators in helping their children understand Christian teachings. This is important because both parents and children already understand the values of the Tongkonan culture and are closely connected to them. A cultural expert from Toraja stated, "*Pada melada'ki' na pada den nasang tu inan ta,*" which means "We all learn, and we all have a place" (Natty SX, 2025). When someone studies at a Tongkonan, they will still receive recognition from both the government and traditional institutions because this cannot be separated from the context of education.

Today, societal values are no longer ingrained, resulting in the current generation's inability to implement good values. According to the author's observations, this is due to the lack of primary educators, namely parents, in children's education. Education and teaching are entirely delegated to schools and institutions that deal with the community. Many parents blame schools when problems relate to values or deviant behavior exhibited by a child.

Research discussing child education in the family has been described by Pradnyani (2023), who explains child education in the family using a child-friendly approach. In this case, Pradnyani (2023) provides an understanding to parents, specifically in a patriarchal culture, to provide equal opportunities and attention for children to develop. Wirawan (2021) explains that primary education in the family can shape a child's character. Fulfilling a child's education will make them intelligent in a holistic way. Regarding education in the family

in the digital era, Boiliu and Polii (2020) and Samly and Saptono (2022) say that parents must repeatedly be responsible for instilling Christian values in their children. Furthermore, the research by Ahalapada and Bambang (2024) discusses the central role of parents in teaching love to children. These studies reveal that family education, which primary educators, namely parents, carry out, is very important. The emphasis on the responsibility of parents as Christian educators has been widely written about.

In this study, I would like to analyze the existence of educators in the family, specifically parents, about the existence of Tongkonan in Tana Toraja. Tongkonan is not only a place for studying values, but it is often forgotten that Tongkonan is also a place for reviving primary educators, namely parents, in their existence. Restoring parents' natural role and existence as primary educators is then analyzed through the lens of education within the context of the free curriculum. Research on parental education was conducted by Tari and Tafonao (2019). In their study, Tari and Tafonao (2019) emphasized education within the family, particularly by fathers, based on the study of Colossians 3:21, which states that education should be carried out out of love. This study differs because my research focuses on restoring the educational function of the family by analyzing education within the Tongkonan system based on the Merdeka Curriculum. The research by Hutabarat and Putrawan (2021) focuses more on the role of parents in fostering self-control in children, shaping children's character effectively, and developing their potential. In my research, I analyze educators within the Tongkonan context to implement it in Christian families in Toraja. Furthermore, Anjaya's (2021) research discusses Javanese philosophy as a cultural heritage rarely introduced to the current generation, despite its potential in developing Christian family education. This study focuses on analyzing Tongkonan culture to restore the natural role of primary educators. Given the existing concerns, the issues to be examined in depth are how to restore the family as the center of Christian education by referring to Tongkonan culture, and how the concept of independent learning in Tongkonan culture can be implemented in family education in Toraja. Thus, this study aims to discover a value in the Tongkonan culture that can enhance parental involvement as primary educators and to identify the concept of "*merdeka belajar*" within the Tongkonan culture that primary educators can implement to improve the quality of education in *Tana Toraja*.

## **Research Method**

This study uses qualitative research. Qualitative research is research whose findings do not come from statistical procedures. Qualitative research focuses more on natural processes in the field (Zaluchu, 2020). Using qualitative research methods, researchers can collect data through literature studies on various concepts of primary educators in the family, namely parents, and analysis of the concept of Tongkonan culture. This study was conducted in three Tongkonan regions in Tana Toraja. I chose these regions because, in my view, they can provide the data I need regarding education within the family, particularly about Tongkonan culture.

Data was collected from the field and relevant books. The data was then analyzed through three stages: First, data reduction. Data collected from the field and literature studies were summarized and focused on information relevant to the research topic; Second, data display. The reduced data is presented in a structured and easy-to-understand format, such as narrative text. Third, conclusions are drawn and verified. Conclusions are drawn based on the data presented, then verified to ensure their validity (*conclusion drawing and verification*) (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Miles et al., 2019).

## **Result and Discussion**

### *Education in the Concept of Tongkonan*

Many discussions in books and journals related to Tongkonan focus more on the values within Tongkonan. For example, values can be seen directly in Tongkonan itself, as well as the moral and life values within it. However, the author emphasizes education in this study, highlighting the implementers of these values: parents.

#### Parents as Teachers

Tongkonan is a place for family teaching and education. Although the author has not found information about who carries out teaching and education in the family, observing the practices that occur, it can be understood that those who carry out teaching, which is part of education, are the Tongkonan or the parents in the Tongkonan. In a study conducted by Natty SX (2025), it is stated that there are general and specific family tasks within a Tongkonan. In the context

of teaching, parents instill love and a sense of family unity. Parents in the Tongkonan are not only responsible for ensuring the well-being of the extended family within the Tongkonan community. Parents in the Tongkonan must ensure that children who become heirs to everything related to the Tongkonan are taught to develop and cultivate these values through the generations.

As teachers in the context of the Tongkonan concept, parents have a special duty to introduce blood relations to their children and introduce Tongkonan to children through *aluk* (rules or ways of life) and *ada'* (customs) (Natty SX, 2025). Teaching values and norms to children is carried out continuously in various ways. All activities carried out in the Tongkonan are part of teaching and instilling life values and spiritual values that will become their guiding principles in life.

#### Parents as Communicators of Norms

A communicator is generally understood as someone who conveys a message. A communicator must have a message, in this case, an idea that must be conveyed to the audience (Harahap et al., 2021). A communicator acts as a messenger, so ideally, they must understand the message to be conveyed well and appropriately so that it is conveyed properly and correctly. Regarding communication within the family, the parent is the person who acts as a communicator in conveying *aluk* (rules or ways of life) that contain values and norms.

The family is the only social system accepted in all societies, whether religious or non-religious. Families have various roles and positions depending on their context. Families can be interpreted as the foundation of every society, where all family members have their respective roles in strengthening social relationships and moral values within society (Elmubarok, 2009; Tong, 2017). The primary right of parents to determine the characteristics of their children's education is the freedom of parents (Wolterstorff, 2007). Parents cannot be indoctrinated about how to educate their children by any party, but what is very important is that education is the responsibility of parents and is mandatory. Education from parents is very important because there is an emotional closeness that can instinctively facilitate understanding of how children learn. Essentially, a special bond is formed between an infant and their primary caregiver. In the context of the Toraja people, specifically within the Tongkonan system, the primary caregiver

is entrusted to both parents. Generally, children emotionally bond with their primary caregiver (Sarwono, 2016). With this emotional connection, every message conveyed through education and teaching can be easily understood.

In Toraja education, children are educated from generation to generation, which is reinforced in the Tongkonan culture. Tongkonan is a place for education and a means of education. Parents, as the primary educators in Tongkonan, must have appropriate parenting patterns. Parental patterns become the most important means of cultural transmission from generation to generation (Salu, 2022). The norms commonly referred to as *ada* in the Toraja context are practiced in various aspects of life, and are first introduced by parents. Thus, when people see children behaving well, they always attribute this to good parenting.

#### Parents as Teachers of Life Values

Throughout their lives, the Toraja people have realized that customs and traditions express who they are, so they teach them to their children rigorously and consistently. Cultural values serve as the highest guidelines for community life (Pakan et al., 2018). The values of Toraja life are very important for them to develop and pass on to future generations.

The values that have inspired the Toraja people and been passed down from generation to generation are *karapasan* (peace), *tosangrapu* (kinship), *longko'* (honor), *kasianggaran* (mutual respect), and *siangkaran* (mutual cooperation) (Riani et al., 2023). The Toraja people always uphold *Karapasan*, so if a problem can potentially divide family members or the community, it is discussed in the Tongkonan. This is closely related to *tosangrapu*, or kinship. In Toraja culture, kinship is demonstrated in many aspects of life, such as attendance at family events and even giving to those in need as a form of mutual support. *Kasianggaran* is always demonstrated by instilling values in everyone, such as respecting their elders, respecting the government, and respecting community leaders. However, the Toraja people also highly respect the rights of individuals as persons protected by law and, more importantly, as God's most noble creations. The practice of *siangkaran* is consistently demonstrated through active participation in helping others in various aspects of life, such as building a house, during the *rambu tuka* or *rambu solo* ceremonies, and other community events.

The values of life in the Tongkonan culture are conveyed in various ways, including through stories. The way stories are told includes choosing the right

place, paying attention to seating positions, using language that is easy to understand, intonation, character portrayal, emotional expression, and voice imitation (Majid, 2013). The instilling of values through stories has been revealed through Bubun et al. (2024). Research highlights one of the folk tales of the Toraja people, explaining that the story contains excellent values and morals, especially in dealing with today's increasingly difficult world. The story of Tulangdidi explains that success can be achieved through struggle and a difficult life process.

### Parents as Teachers of Symbolic Meaning

Symbols have two very different meanings in a historical context. In religious thought and practice, symbols commonly manifest a transcendent reality (Algita, 2024). In a logical and scientific system of thought, the term symbol commonly refers to an abstract sign (Gulo & Hia, 2024). Symbols can be signs, signals, gestures, symptoms, codes, indices, and icons (Tangirerung, 2017). Symbols are one of the most effective learning media and methods in education. This is because symbols are so close to a person's life. In contextual learning strategies, symbols are very popular and do not burden children's minds, making them happy to learn. Learning contexts with symbols can begin with various symbols familiar to children, which are then explained in simple language but with deep meanings that can be implemented in life.

A symbol is defined as a symbol if it can represent what it symbolizes based on the interpretation of that symbol (Tangirerung, 2017). Symbols only have meaning when their value or meaning is understood. Symbols cannot explain themselves, but become meaningful when interpreted in a context.

Symbol-based education is understood and developed not only in the context of the Toraja people but also in the education of the Israelites. The Bible records that they used symbols placed in various easily accessible places (Salu, 2022). During Jacob's flight, he had a dream in Luz in which he acknowledged the existence of God. As a symbol to remember this, he erected a stone as a memorial, poured oil on it, and changed the place's name from Luz to Bethel.

Symbols for the Toraja people are extremely diverse. They begin with color symbols: red, white, black, and yellow. There are also carved symbols, symbols in the form of poetry, and symbols represented through various activities. Black symbolizes death, which can be interpreted as darkness; white symbolizes purity or sanctity; red symbolizes human life; and yellow symbolizes life, blessings, and

divine power. In carvings, cotton symbolizes farmers' harvest, betel leaves are the product of farmers' crops used as a social tool and material for prayer ceremonies, and the carved tip of a keris sheath is the work of an artisan. In this context, the keris symbolizes law and justice, the carving of the gourd plant represents the farmers' crops, the carving of the machete blade symbolizes the tools of workers and craftsmen, the carving of the buffalo head complete with horns, ears, and eyes symbolizes strong individuals in society or leaders, and the carving of the Lenjuang leaf tip symbolizes grandeur (Tangirerung, 2022). The meaning of these symbols is then taught and lived out, so simply seeing or hearing the symbols serves as a reminder for someone.

### ***The Concept of Independent Learning in Tongkonan***

In general, the concept of independent learning gives educators the freedom to be more creative in their teaching methods to achieve the objectives of education (Sulistiawati et al., 2023). The most important aspect of independent learning is the freedom to be creative while maintaining the learning objectives. (Lestari et al., 2023). In general, this concept aims to provide an understanding that in accepting a teaching, it is necessary to adapt it to the child's habits so that it does not burden the child in receiving lessons.

The goal of Tongkonan education is for children to inherit the values embraced by their ancestors, namely *karapasan* (peace), *tosangrapu* (kinship), *longko'* (honor), *kasianggaran* (mutual respect), and *sianggaran* (cooperation). These are the core values that form the basis of Toraja teaching. According to Waruwu (2010), Cultural values can shape personality, patterns of thought, patterns of emotion, and patterns of behavior. The values built into this Tongkonan are based on holistic character education. In the anthropological understanding of individuals, character is a holistic psychological dynamic that enables one to understand and appreciate moral and non-moral values in determining how they see and interact with the world (Koesoema, 2012). In its implementation, character education has three important elements that must be considered: principles, processes, and practices in teaching (Elmubarok, 2009; Simangunsong & Hermanto, 2023; Sopakua et al., 2024). Thus, these values must be incorporated into a teaching concept that is understood and practiced daily.

These values are passed down to future generations in various ways, such as by introducing symbols. Values can also be passed down through stories, and

their meanings can be drawn from them. They are further transmitted through social activities within the community and informal teaching conducted during family gatherings in the Tongkonan. In this context, primary educators act as educators, communicating societal norms that are elaborated with Christian values and embedded in the meaning of life within each symbol.

The concept of independent learning in the context of Tongkonan integrates the creative freedom of educators with deep local cultural values as the foundation of character education. Independent learning emphasizes freedom for educators to create teaching methods according to the needs and habits of children so as not to burden the learning process, while remaining oriented towards clear educational goals. In the Tongkonan system, the goal of education is to pass on the noble values of the Toraja ancestors, such as *karapasan* (peace), *tosangrapu* (family unity), *longko'* (honor), *kasianggaran* (mutual respect), and *siangkaran* (cooperation), which form the cultural roots that shape children's personalities, mindsets, emotions, and behaviors.

These values form the foundation of holistic character education, in which character is understood as a psychological dynamic that enables individuals to understand and internalize moral and non-moral values in their social interactions. The implementation of character education in the Tongkonan involves principles, processes, and teaching practices that must be understood and carried out in everyday life. This legacy of values is conveyed through symbols, stories, social activities, and informal teaching in family gatherings in the Tongkonan, where primary educators play a role in communicating community norms enriched with Christian values as the meaning of life in every symbol.

Freedom of learning in Tongkonan is the granting of freedom to educators to adapt and create teaching methods that are appropriate to the culture and customs of children, while instilling holistic and meaningful local values, so that education is not only academic but also shapes the personality and morals of the next generation as a whole.

### **Implications**

In this modern era, many people tend to be busy and want everything to be instant, including the desire to have good and proud children. However, parents often forget they must be the primary role models in shaping successful children. Unfortunately, many parents entrust the responsibility of education

entirely to the church and school, then blame both parties when their children face problems.

The Tongkonan tradition in the context of the Toraja people is one way of restoring the nature of Christian education. The concept of education in Tongkonan is based on the idea that parents are teachers for their children. Parents must communicate moral values to their children through verbal and non-verbal symbols. Parents in the Tongkonan are lifelong educators whose teachings are deeply ingrained in their children. Therefore, about the free curriculum, parents are not burdened as educators, nor are children burdened as recipients of education. This is because the values taught are deeply ingrained, universally understood, and implemented in everyday life.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

For further research, it is hoped that theology-based education can be studied and then compared with the local wisdom values of Toraja culture. This is important considering that traditions and culture are very close to everyone. Still, it is also very important to study them from the perspective of Christian theological education based on the Bible, which is also part of the Christian religious education curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

It cannot be denied by people who have families and are blessed with children that their main duty is to educate their children according to God's will. This is a command from God to teach children to love God and their neighbors through implementation in their daily lives. The concept of education in Tongkonan is one answer to the negligence of parents today regarding their children's education, which is often left entirely to schools and churches. This study concludes that the concept of education in Tongkonan, based on the Merdeka curriculum in Christian families in Toraja, can restore the natural role of educators in Christian families in Toraja. In this context, the concept of Christian religious education in the Tongkonan restores the natural role of parents as primary educators, enabling them to act as instructors, communicators of norms, teachers of life values, and interpreters of symbolic meanings, which are then elaborated in the principles, processes, and practices of education.

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