

Orality Hermeneutics in the Gospel of Mark and the Timorese *Natoni* Tradition: A Comparative Library-Based Study

Yanjumseby Yeverson Manafe

Sekolah Tinggi Theologia Ebenhaezer Tanjung Enim, Indonesia

✉Correspondence: manafeseby2@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the dialogue between the oral traditions of the Timorese people and the Gospel of Mark through an oral-based hermeneutical approach, operationalized as a comparative library-based study rather than field ethnography. Primary data consist of the Markan text (Mark 4:1–34 and Mark 8:27–30), secondary data consist of published ethno-graphic documentation of Timorese oral practices, particularly *natoni*. Three analytical indicators are used consistently throughout the study: communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity, synthesized from Walter J. Ong, Werner H. Kelber, James D. G. Dunn, Richard Bauman, Ruth Finnegan, Richard A. Horsley, and Dell Hymes. The analysis shows that both corpora exhibit structurally comparable oral mechanisms (repetition, dia-logic address, and performative closure) that sustain memory and shape communal identity, without implying any historical or genealogical connection between them. The article positions its contribution against prior orality scholarship, particularly the volume *Performing the Gospel*, and argues that its distinct contribution lies in a documentary-comparative model applicable to library-based contextual hermeneutics where field access is constrained. The study concludes with an explicit call for future field-based validation of the proposed model.

Keywords: Gospel of Mark; oral culture; comparative library study; *natoni*; contextual hermeneutics

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji dialog antara tradisi lisan masyarakat Timor dan kesaksian Injil Markus melalui pendekatan hermeneutika berbasis orality, yang secara metodologis dioperasionalkan sebagai studi pustaka komparatif, bukan penelitian lapangan (etnografi partisipatoris). Data primer berupa teks Markus (Markus 4:1-34 dan Markus 8:27-30), data sekunder berupa dokumentasi etnografis terpublikasi mengenai praktik tutur masyarakat Timor, khususnya *natoni*. Penelitian menggunakan tiga indikator analisis secara konsisten di sepanjang naskah, yaitu memori komunal, peristiwa tutur (speech event), dan performativitas narasi, yang disintesis dari pemikiran Walter J. Ong, Werner H. Kelber, James D. G. Dunn, Richard Bauman, Ruth Finnegan, Richard A. Horsley, dan Dell Hymes. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa kedua korpus memperlihatkan mekanisme oral yang secara struktural dapat diperbandingkan (repetisi, sapaan dialogis, dan penutup performatif) yang berfungsi memelihara memori dan membentuk identitas komunal, tanpa mengandaikan hubungan historis maupun genealogis di antara keduanya. Artikel ini memosisikan kontribusinya berhadapan dengan kajian oralitas terdahulu, terutama volume *Performing the Gospel*, dan berargumen bahwa kebaruannya terletak pada model dokumenter-komparatif yang dapat diterapkan dalam hermeneutika kontekstual berbasis pustaka ketika akses lapangan tidak tersedia. Penelitian ini ditutup dengan seruan eksplisit bagi validasi lapangan pada penelitian lanjutan.

Kata kunci: Injil Markus; budaya lisan; studi pustaka komparatif; *natoni*; hermeneutika kontekstual

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on the Gospel of Mark has long been dominated by historical-critical, narrative, and literary approaches that treat the text primarily as an object of written interpretation. These approaches have contributed significantly to understanding the Gospel's narrative structure, redactional history, and historical context of composition, yet their text-centered orientation has not fully reckoned with the fact that traditions about Jesus first circulated within an oral culture before eventually being committed to writing.¹ As a result, the performative, memorative, and communal dimensions that characterized the communication of the earliest Christian communities have often received limited attention in New Testament studies.

Developments in orality studies over the past several decades, pioneered by Walter J. Ong, Werner H. Kelber, James D. G. Dunn, Ruth Finnegan, and Richard A. Horsley, demonstrate that oral tradition is not a simpler mode of communication than written tradition, but rather a communication system with its own distinct mechanisms for sustaining memory, constructing collective identity, and transmitting knowledge through patterns of repetition, formula, dialogue, and narrative performativity.² This perspective has opened the way for a fresh reading of the Gospel of Mark as a text that still bears the traces of oral culture even though it now exists in written form.³

This article must state at the outset one methodological constraint that shapes the entire research design: the examination of Timorese oral tradition was conducted entirely through library research into previously published ethnographic documentation, rather than through participant observation or field interviews with practitioners of *natoní*. This limitation is not a concealed weakness but a deliberate methodological choice that consciously restricts the scope of the study's claims to the level of documentary-comparative analysis. As a consequence, the term "qualitative research," commonly used for field-based studies, is consistently replaced throughout this article by the term *comparative library-based study*, and the methodological implications of this choice are explained in detail in the Method section.

In this study, the term Orality Hermeneutics does not refer to an established theory developed by a single scholar, but rather to a conceptual synthesis formulated by the author on the basis of Ong's theory of oral culture, Kelber's concept of *orality and textuality*, Dunn's notion of *communal remembering*, the *performance theory* of Bauman and Finnegan, and Hymes's concept of *speech event*.⁴ This synthesis allows the Gospel of Mark to be read not merely as a written document but also as a representation of a living tradition of faith, sustained through the community's practices of proclamation, hearing, remembering, and reproduction.

This approach carries particular relevance when placed in dialogue with communities that continue to maintain oral tradition as a vital part of their social and religious life. The Timorese people exhibit precisely this character: oral traditions such as *natoní*, customary poetry, ritual formulas, and genealogical narratives demonstrate that the transmission of knowledge does not depend solely on written documents but occurs through communal

¹ Fabio Tarzia, "The Origins of Christianity Between Orality, Writing, and Images: A Mediological Analysis," *Religions* 16, no. 5 (2025).

² Elwira M. Grossman, "Blaski i Cienie Globalizacji, Czyli Problemy Polonistyki w Badaniach Komparatystycznych.," *Centrum Humanistyki Cyfrowej* 6 (2009): 66–78.

³ Richard A. Horsley, "Can Study of the Historical Jesus Escape Its Typographical Captivity?," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 19, no. 3 (2021): 265–329.

⁴ A Batten, "Book Review: Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark. Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber. Edited by Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper. & John Miles Foley. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006.," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39 (2009): 44–45.

communicative practices that integrate memory, performativity, and social participation.⁵ This phenomenon is not unique to Timor, but the Timorese context offers a particularly relevant space for dialogue because its oral traditions continue to perform a strong social and religious function.

Building on this shared communicative character, this study does not seek to equate Timorese oral traditions with the world of the Gospel of Mark, nor does it assume any direct historical relationship between them. Instead, it places both traditions in a hermeneutical dialogue that facilitates a contextual reading of the Gospel by examining correspondences in communicative patterns, mechanisms of communal memory, and narrative performance within oral cultures. Accordingly, the comparison is conducted at the level of communicative mechanisms rather than theological content, cultural meaning, or historical genealogy.

This study is situated within the broader tradition of *orality* scholarship in New Testament studies and contextual theology. While the dialogue between Gospel orality and local oral traditions has been explored, for example in *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark*,⁶ and in Indonesian contextual theology engaging Sundanese⁷ and Batak Toba traditions,⁸ and in church-centric Bible translation initiatives among Indonesia's coastal oral-language communities such as the Seaman people of the Riau Archipelago,⁹ this article makes two specific contributions. *First*, it consistently applies three indicators of orality hermeneutics, namely communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity, to compare Mark 4:1–34 and 8:27–30 with ethnographic documentation of Timorese *naton*. *Second*, it proposes a documentary comparative model of orality hermeneutics that enables contextual interpretation through library-based research while explicitly acknowledging the limitations of secondary data and the need for future field validation.

Against this background, this study asks how the characteristics of orality in Mark 4:1–34 and Mark 8:27–30 can be understood through orality hermeneutics and brought into hermeneutical dialogue with ethnographic documentation of Timorese oral tradition. To address this question, the study identifies oral features in the two Markan pericopes, analyzes *naton* using the same analytical framework, and develops a hermeneutical-comparative model. It contributes theoretically by synthesizing orality hermeneutics into three operational dimensions, methodologically by proposing a documentary-comparative framework for contextual interpretation based on library research, and contextually by extending the dialogue between New Testament studies and Timorese oral tradition, with implications for missiology, pastoral practice, and theological education.

⁵ John Darwis Fallo and Fathur Rokhman, "Tuturan Ritual Naton Adat Masyarakat Etnis Timor Dalam Penyambutan Tamu Di Sekolah," *Seloka: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* 5 (2016): 105–114.

⁶ Batten, "Book Review: *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark*. Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber. Edited by Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, & John Miles Foley. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006."; Richard Walsh, "Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark: Essays Dedicated to Werner Kelber – Edited by Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper, and John Miles Foley," *Religious Studies Review* 32 (2006): 198.

⁷ Jellia Puspa Purnama and Yanto Paulus Hermanto, "Model Transformasi Terhadap Budaya Sunda Cageur, Bageur, Bener, Pinter Jeung Singer," *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi Kharismatika* 7, no. 1 (June 27, 2024): 71–85, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/diegesis/article/view/460>.

⁸ Marulam Simangunsong and Joni Manumpak Parulian Gultom, "Kajian Teologis Tentang Pembedaan Gender Dan Hak Waris Suku Batak Toba Serta Implikasinya Di Perantauan," *DIEGESIS: Jurnal Teologi Kharismatika* 7, no. 2 (December 16, 2024): 184–202, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/diegesis/article/view/624>.

⁹ Fredy Simanjuntak et al., "Church-Centric Bible Translation as a Model of Community Service in Seaman Communities," *Real Coster: Jurnal Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat* 9, no. 1 (March 27, 2026): 1–19, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/coster/article/view/724>.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Orality Hermeneutics

The study of orality within New Testament scholarship emerged as a critique of the tendency to regard the Gospels solely as literary products. Although historical-critical approaches and redaction criticism have successfully illuminated the process by which the Gospels were composed, both often pay insufficient attention to the fact that traditions about Jesus first circulated within an oral culture before being codified into written text. Orality studies have therefore become an important approach for understanding the formation, transmission, and function of the Gospel tradition.¹⁰

Walter J. Ong explains that oral culture rests on repetition, formula, rhythm, and direct interaction between speaker and listener.¹¹ This idea was further developed by Werner H. Kelber, who showed that narrative, dialogue, and repetition in the Gospels reflect the proclamatory mechanisms of the early Christian community.¹² Building on this, James D. G. Dunn, through the concept of *Jesus Remembered*, argues that tradition is preserved through communal memory that maintains the stability of the core testimony while allowing flexibility in how it is retold.¹³ The performative dimension of oral tradition has been further enriched by Ruth Finnegan, Richard Bauman, Dell Hymes, and Richard A. Horsley, who emphasize that the meaning of tradition is shaped through speech events, social context, and communal response.

These various perspectives are integrated here into three operational indicators applied consistently throughout the study. *First*, communal memory, the collective process of sustaining tradition through practices of remembering, repeating, and re-proclaiming an inherited testimony. Scholarship within Indonesian Christian education likewise points to a connection between memory formation and the internalization of Scripture; a study linking the psychology of memory to reflection on Joshua 1:8 among Christian youth,¹⁴ for example, shows that communal memory of the biblical text carries both a cognitive and a spiritual dimension. *Second*, speech event, the analysis of the relationship among speaker, listener, context, purpose, and communicative norms that together shape the meaning of an utterance. *Third*, narrative performativity, the capacity of a narrative to generate social action, shape communal identity, and affirm the authority of tradition at the moment it is spoken.

These three indicators constitute the sole analytical framework employed throughout the study, from the methodological design to the discussion and the formulation of the conceptual model. Reducing diverse theoretical perspectives to three operational indicators is not intended to oversimplify their conceptual richness; rather, it provides an integrated, systematic, and replicable framework for analysis. Within this framework, orality hermeneutics is understood as an interpretive approach that views both the Gospel of Mark and Timorese oral tradition as communicative practices sustained through communal memory, speech events, and narrative performativity. Accordingly, the meaning of tradition is derived

¹⁰ Rafael Rodríguez, "Text as Tradition - Tradition as Text Early Christian Memory and Jesus' Threat against the Temple," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 19, no. 2 (2023): 115–133.

¹¹ Walter J. Ong, "Literacy and Orality in Our Times," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 1 (1980): 197–204.

¹² Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and QNo Title* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). *The Oral and the Written Gospel*

¹³ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003).

¹⁴ Jekson Tulus and Sang Putra Immanuel Duha, "Analisis Teks Yosua 1:8 Terhadap Memori Dan Aplikasinya Untuk Meningkatkan Prestasi Remaja Di Sekolah Menengah Pertama Glugur, Medan," *REAL DIDACHE: Journal of Christian Education* 4, no. 2 (September 30, 2024): 129–144, <https://ojs.sttreabatam.ac.id/index.php/didache/article/view/540>.

not only from its textual form but also from the ways it is transmitted, received, and continually actualized within the life of the community.

Table 1. Analytical Indicators of Orality Hermeneutics

Indicator	Primary Theoretical Basis	Analytical Focus
Communal Memory	Dunn (<i>Jesus Remembered</i>); Ong and Kelber for the mechanisms of repetition/formula	How the community sustains and transmits the core of a testimony or tradition
Speech Event	Hymes (<i>speech event</i>)	The relationship among speaker and listener, social context, and communicative purpose and norms
Narrative Performativity	Bauman and Finnegan (<i>performance</i>); Horsley	The social action and identity produced by an utterance or narrative

METHODS

This study is a comparative library-based study that integrates biblical textual analysis with documentary research into the ethnographic literature on Timorese oral tradition. This term was deliberately chosen to distinguish the study from the general label *qualitative research*, which in much of the methodological literature is more commonly associated with the empirical collection of data through observation, interviews, focus group discussions, or other forms of fieldwork.¹⁵ By contrast, this study rests entirely on the systematic analysis of library sources and documentary materials and is therefore more accurately categorized as a comparative library-based study. It develops its argument through the critical interpretation, conceptual synthesis, and comparison of relevant written sources.¹⁶ This term is accordingly regarded as a more accurate representation of the study's design. The methodological consequences of this choice, including its accompanying limitations, are explained explicitly at the end of this subsection.

Data Sources and Types

This study uses two categories of data: primary and secondary. The primary data consist of Mark 4:1–34 and 8:27–30, analyzed using the Greek critical text of *Novum Testamentum Graece* and compared with the Indonesian translation to identify indicators of orality at the narrative and, where relevant, lexical and syntactic levels. The analysis focuses on features such as direct speech, dialogic particles, and repetitive patterns, particularly imperative forms, that characterize oral communication.¹⁷

Secondary data consist of published ethnographic studies on *naton* and other Timorese oral traditions, particularly the works of Fallo and Rokhman, Ande and Supianto, and Nazarudin's analysis of David Hicks. These sources were purposively selected because they

¹⁵ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 5th ed. (California: SAGE Publications, 2023); Yvonne S. Lincoln, S. Lyhnam, and E. Guba, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences, Revisited," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 5th ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), 213–263.

¹⁶ Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (November 2019): 333–339, <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0148296319304564>; Maria J. Grant and Andrew Booth, "A Typology of Reviews: An Analysis of 14 Review Types and Associated Methodologies," *Health Information & Libraries Journal* 26, no. 2 (June 27, 2009): 91–108, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x>.

¹⁷ Eberhard Nestle et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Mohringen, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

provide detailed structural descriptions of oral practices, enabling the same analytical indicators applied to the Markan text to be used for methodologically comparable analysis.¹⁸

Analytical Procedure

The analysis was conducted in three parallel stages for both corpora to ensure methodological comparability. First, a textual-documentary analysis identified the structural features of each corpus. In the Markan text, the analysis focused on markers of orality such as repetition, direct speech, dialogue, and narrative patterns in the Greek text. For *naton*, the analysis examined published ethnographic documentation to identify comparable communicative features, including formulaic patterns, antiphonal exchanges, and ritual markers. Accordingly, the analysis of *naton* was based on documentary evidence rather than direct field observation.¹⁹

The second stage applied the three indicators of orality hermeneutics, namely communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity, independently to each corpus to identify the mechanisms through which oral traditions are formed, transmitted, and interpreted. The third stage compared the findings to identify similarities and differences in communicative mechanisms and social functions. This comparison was conducted at a conceptual and functional level to establish a hermeneutical dialogue between the two traditions, without implying any historical relationship or theological and cultural equivalence.²⁰

To enhance the credibility of the findings despite the absence of primary field data, this study employed source triangulation by comparing multiple ethnographic publications on *naton*.²¹ Interpretations were grounded in published ethnographic sources, while findings supported by only a single source are presented as tentative and subject to verification through future field research. This approach follows the qualitative research principle that triangulation strengthens the credibility and trustworthiness of interpretation.²²

Methodological Limitations and Their Justification

This study does not collect primary data through interviews or participant observation with *naton* practitioners. Accordingly, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. *First*, all descriptions of Timorese oral tradition are based on published ethnographic documentation rather than direct empirical observation and therefore constitute secondary interpretations. *Second*, because *naton* is practiced across diverse social, linguistic, and cultural contexts, local variations, dialects, and regional or clan-specific traditions may not

¹⁸ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, ed. C. Deborah Laughton, *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, 3rd ed. (California: SAGE Publication, 2002); Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publication, 2018).

¹⁹ Glenn A. Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (2009): 27–40.

²⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Revised ed. (London: A&C Black, 2013); Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

²¹ Fallo and Rokhman, "Tuturan Ritual Naton Adat Masyarakat Etnis Timor Dalam Penyambutan Tamu Di Sekolah"; Andreas Ande and Supianto, "Reducing Conflict Based on History Education and Oral Traditions of Atoin Pah Meto in West Timor," *Historical Encounters* 12, no. 1 (2025): 50–56; Nazarudin, "Oral Literature, Gender, and Precedence in East Timor: Metaphysics in Narrative," by David Hicks, *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* (2023).

²² Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, 2nd ed. (Columbus, Ohio: McGraw-Hill, 1978); Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Qualitative Research* (Singapore: Mc. Graw Hill Book Co., 1985); Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*.

be fully represented in the literature, as each ethnographic source reflects a particular community and research setting.²³ *Third*, the proposed model of hermeneutical dialogue is presented as a preliminary conceptual framework rather than an empirical generalization of Timorese oral tradition. Its validity requires further verification through ethnographic field research involving direct engagement with *naton* practitioners.²⁴ These methodological limitations are acknowledged throughout the analysis and reaffirmed in the Conclusion to ensure transparency and methodological rigor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Orality in Mark 4:1–34 and Mark 8:27–30: A Textual Analysis

Mark 4:1–34 exhibits characteristics of orality that function as a structural mechanism in the delivery of the narrative. The pericope is framed by the imperative formulas ἀκούετε (*akouete*, “Listen!”; Mark 4:3) and εἴ τις ἔχει ὄτα ἀκούειν ἀκουέτω (*ei tis echei ōta akouein akouetō*, “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear”; Mark 4:9, 23), which together form an *inclusio* while also directing the listener’s attention. From the standpoint of orality hermeneutics, this repetition functions as a mnemonic device that helps the audience follow the flow of the proclamation, consistent with Walter J. Ong’s observation that oral culture relies on *redundancy* to sustain comprehension.²⁵ In addition, the parable of the sower is structured through a recurring enumerative pattern that facilitates memorization and the transmission of tradition. According to Werner H. Kelber, such repetitive patterning is characteristic of oral communication in the ancient Mediterranean world.²⁶ The narrative structure of Mark 4 thus carries not only a rhetorical function but also reflects a communicative mechanism designed for a listening community.

Markers of orality in Mark 4 appear not only in its narrative structure but also in its grammar. The pericope is characterized by paratactic syntax, especially the repeated use of the conjunction καί (*kai*) and minimal subordination, creating an additive and easily followed flow typical of oral communication. As Kelber argues, this predominance of parataxis reflects a compositional style shaped by oral tradition and oriented toward a listening audience.²⁷

This grammatical dimension simultaneously undergirds the passage’s theological message. In Mark 4:11–12, the purpose clause introduced by ἵνα (*hina*), which echoes Isaiah 6:9–10, affirms that τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ (*to mystērion tēs basileias tou theou*) has been granted to the disciples, yet remains hidden from τοῖς ἔξω (*tois exō*, “those outside”). The formula “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear” thus functions not merely as a mnemonic device but also as a hermeneutical invitation demanding a response of faith. In this way, the oral structure of Mark 4 directly supports the theme of revelation and concealment as one of the Gospel’s central christological motifs.

Mark 8:27–30, by contrast, constructs orality through an escalating dialogue that moves from public opinion toward Peter’s personal confession. From the standpoint of performance theory, this pattern represents a form of *keying*, which transforms the conversation into a communicative event demanding audience engagement.²⁸ Jesus’s command that his identity not be disclosed (Mark 8:30) sustains narrative tension while simultaneously inviting the

²³ Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*.

²⁴ Yin, *Case Study Research Design and Methods*; Lincoln and Guba, *Qualitative Research*.

²⁵ Ong, “Literacy and Orality in Our Times.”

²⁶ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* No Title.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Richard Bauman, “Verbal Art as Performance,” *American Anthropologist* 77, no. 2 (1975): 290–311.

listener to respond to the question of Jesus's identity. As Kelly R. Iverson argues, Mark's rhetorical strategy engages the audience as participants in the very event of confessing faith.²⁹

At the grammatical level, Mark 8:27 and 8:29 employ the form λέγει (*legei*) in the *historical present*, which, according to Werner H. Kelber, renders the event as though it were unfolding before the listener.³⁰ The dialogue develops from οἱ ἄνθρωποι (*hoi anthrōpoi*, "the people") to ὑμεῖς (*hymeis*, "you"), marking a shift from public opinion to personal confession. Peter's confession, σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός (*sy ei ho Christos*, "You are the Christ"), constitutes a performative speech act that shapes the identity of the community of disciples, while the motif of the *messianic secret* (Mark 8:30) links this confession to the revelation of the Son of Man's suffering (Mark 8:31), making Mark 8:27–30 a literary and theological turning point within the Gospel.³¹

Assessed through the study's three indicators, the two pericopes display complementary mechanisms of orality. In the dimension of communal memory, Mark 4 anchors tradition in agrarian experience, whereas Mark 8 draws on the accumulation of public opinion as a starting point leading toward Peter's confession, consistent with James D. G. Dunn's concept of *communal remembering*.³² In the dimension of speech event, Mark 4 moves from public to private space, while Mark 8 unfolds "on the way," forming a personal dialogue in the sense articulated by Dell Hymes's theory.³³ In the dimension of narrative performativity, Mark 4 calls for a response to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, while Peter's confession in Mark 8 shapes the identity of the community of disciples as a community that confesses Jesus as the Messiah, such that the proclamation of the Gospel functions as both a social and a theological event, as argued by Richard A. Horsley.³⁴

Table 2. Analysis of the Three Indicators in Mark 4:1–34 and Mark 8:27–30

Indicator	Mark 4:1–34	Mark 8:27–30
Communal Memory	Agrarian imagery as an anchor of collective memory for an agrarian community	Accumulated public opinion as a representation of circulating collective memory
Speech Event	Shift from public space (lakeshore) to private space (explanation to the disciples)	Mobile, informal space ("on the way"); personal, confrontational questioning
Narrative Performativity	The parable invites a decision to hear; the <i>inclusio</i> formula marks the boundaries of the speech unit	Peter's confession as a performative speech act constituting the identity of the community of disciples

These findings show that orality in the Gospel of Mark does not appear in a uniform manner but is realized through distinct mechanisms corresponding to the rhetorical and theological function of each pericope. Mark 4 relies on repetition, mnemonic patterning, and parabolic teaching, whereas Mark 8 constructs orality through performative dialogue that

²⁹ Kelly R. Iverson, "Performing Early Christian Literature: Audience Experience and Interpretation of the Gospels," *Performing Early Christian Literature: Audience Experience and Interpretation of the Gospels* (2021): 1–230.

³⁰ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* No Title.

³¹ Paul D. Wheatley, "The Ritual Bridge between Narrative and Performance in the Gospel of Mark," *Religions* 14, no. 9 (2023).

³² James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-Envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 49, no. 2 (April 7, 2003): 139–175, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0028688503000080/type/journal_article.

³³ Dell Hymes, "Models Of The Interaction of Language and Social Life," *Ethnographic Description and Explanation* (1972).

³⁴ Richard A. Horsley, "Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant, and the Hope of the Poor" (2010).

demands a confession of faith. Orality in Mark, therefore, cannot adequately be understood as a single, general characteristic of the Gospel, but must be analyzed at the level of each narrative unit in order to explain how oral mechanisms function to shape meaning and audience response.

Timorese Oral Tradition: A Documentary Analysis of *Natoni*

As a methodological note, the following discussion constitutes an interpretation of published ethnographic documentation, as explained in the Method section, rather than the result of field observation conducted by the author. Fallo and Rokhman describe *natoni* as performed in guest-welcoming rites as speech composed of a formulaic opening, content dominated by metaphor and parallelism, and a formulaic closing.³⁵ This three-part structure bears a functional correspondence to the *inclusio* pattern in Mark 4, since both employ opening and closing formulas to frame a unit of speech within a context of oral communication.

Ande and Supianto show that *natoni* in the resolution of customary conflict among the *Atoin Pah Meto* proceeds antiphonally, through alternating exchanges of speech until consensus is reached.³⁶ This pattern displays a mechanism comparable to the development of dialogue in Mark 8:27–30, which moves from an initial question toward Peter’s confession as the narrative climax. In both traditions, meaning is constructed through the interaction between utterances rather than through a single, one-directional statement.

Table 3. Analysis of the Three Indicators in Ethnographic Documentation of *Natoni*

Indicator	Description in the Ethnographic Sources	Source
Communal Memory	Genealogical and ancestral narratives with a relatively fixed structure that remains open to contextual variation; narratives of the “ancestral house” as an anchor of identity across space	Nazarudin/Hicks; Thu
Speech Event	Speech occurring within specific rites (guest-welcoming, customary reconciliation) with clearly defined participants, norms, and purposes	Fallo and Rokhman; Ande and Supianto
Narrative Performativity	Antiphonal structuring by spokespersons produces consensus and binding social legitimacy, rather than mere information	Ande and Supianto

Nazarudin, drawing on David Hicks’s ethnographic work, further shows that genealogical narratives and origin myths in Timor maintain a relatively fixed underlying structure while allowing room for variation according to the context of performance.³⁷ Similarly, Thu notes that narratives concerning *knua* (the ancestral house) continue to serve as an anchor of collective identity for the people of Timor-Leste even as their communities experience geographic mobility.³⁸ Both findings align with James D. G. Dunn’s concept of *communal remembering*: that the continuity of tradition is sustained through the stability of its narrative core, together with flexibility in the manner of its transmission.

³⁵ Fallo and Rokhman, “Tuturan Ritual Natoni Adat Masyarakat Etnis Timor Dalam Penyambutan Tamu Di Sekolah.”

³⁶ Ande and Supianto, “Reducing Conflict Based on History Education and Oral Traditions of Atoin Pah Meto in West Timor.”

³⁷ Nazarudin, “Oral Literature, Gender, and Precedence in East Timor: Metaphysics in Narrative,” by David Hicks.”

³⁸ Pyone Myat Thu, “Journeys to Knua: Displacement, Return and Translocality in Timor-Leste,” *Mobilities* 15 (2020): 527–542.

Although these sources examine different contexts, namely guest-welcoming rites, customary conflict resolution, and genealogical narratives, they consistently identify three shared mechanisms: formulaic framing, turn-taking in speech, and a binding social function. This convergence provides the basis for the hermeneutical comparison that follows, which draws on multiple ethnographic sources rather than a single study.

Hermeneutical-Comparative Dialogue

Bringing together the findings of Tables 2 and 3, the principal convergence between the Gospel of Mark and the *naton* tradition lies in their communicative mechanisms rather than their content. Both preserve communal memory through shared cultural references, shape meaning within specific communicative contexts, and employ narrative performance to produce socially binding responses.³⁹ Thus, Peter's confession establishes the identity of the disciples, while *naton* affirms customary reconciliation and legitimacy. The correspondence between the two traditions is therefore functional and hermeneutical, not historical, theological, or cultural.

Table 4. Hermeneutical-Comparative Dialogue: Mark and Naton

Indicator	Gospel of Mark	Timorese Naton Tradition
Communal Memory	Agrarian imagery and collective opinion as an anchor of memory; stability of the core testimony with variation in its telling	Genealogical narrative and the “ancestral house” as an anchor of identity; stability of the core with contextual variation
Speech Event	Shift from public to private space determines the norms and purpose of the speech	Rites (welcoming, reconciliation) with specific participants, norms, and social purposes
Narrative Performativity	Peter’s confession as a speech act constituting the identity of the community of disciples	Antiphonal consensus that constitutes reconciliation and social legitimacy

The comparison developed in this study is limited to communicative mechanisms rather than shared theological content or historical relationships. Whereas Timorese oral tradition serves to preserve custom, identity, and kinship, the oral tradition of the Gospel of Mark centers on the proclamation of Jesus Christ. This distinction safeguards the hermeneutical dialogue from cultural reductionism and theological syncretism. Building on this perspective, the study contributes by consistently applying three indicators of orality hermeneutics, namely communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity, to compare Mark 4 and 8:27–30 with ethnographic documentation of Timorese *naton*, while proposing a documentary-comparative model that explicitly recognizes the limitations of secondary data and invites further validation through field research.⁴⁰

A Documentary-Comparative Model of Orality Hermeneutics

Building on the preceding hermeneutical dialogue, this study proposes a documentary-comparative model of orality hermeneutics for contextual biblical interpretation when primary field research is not feasible. The model comprises four steps: (1) establishing three consistent analytical indicators, namely communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity;

³⁹ James D. G. Dunn, “Eyewitnesses and the Oral Jesus Tradition,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008): 85–105.

⁴⁰ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and QNo Title*.

(2) applying these indicators in parallel to the biblical text and ethnographic documentation; (3) strengthening interpretation through triangulation of secondary sources while treating single-source findings as tentative; and (4) comparing the two corpora at the level of communicative mechanisms rather than theological content, historical relationship, or cultural identity.

Table 5. A Documentary-Comparative Model of Orality Hermeneutics

Step	Procedure	Quality Control
Single Indicator Set	Establishing three indicators applied consistently throughout the article	No duplication or change in the number of indicators across sections
Parallel Analysis	Applying the same indicators separately to the biblical text and the local documentation	Each indicator is supported by explicit textual or documentary evidence, not generalization
Source Triangulation	Drawing on more than one independent ethnographic source per claim wherever possible	Single-source claims are explicitly flagged as tentative
Comparison of Mechanism	Bringing analytical results together at the level of function, rather than content	Theological and social differences are stated explicitly, not obscured

This model offers three principal contributions. *First*, methodologically, it provides a systematic, replicable procedure for contextual theological research that relies on documentary sources when access to fieldwork is limited. *Second*, theologically, it shows that Gospel proclamation can be understood as a communicative practice involving communal memory, speech events, and narrative performativity, such that meaning is shaped not only by the text but also by the process of its delivery and reception within the community. *Third*, contextually, it provides a conceptual foundation for dialogue between biblical studies and Timorese oral tradition while maintaining the epistemological boundaries of the research. The proposed model is therefore not intended as a generalization about the whole of Timorese oral tradition, but as a methodological proposition that can be tested, developed, and refined through ethnographic research in different local contexts.

Implications for the Practice of Missiology, Pastoral Ministry, and Theological Education in Timor

In missiology, these findings suggest that Gospel proclamation becomes more contextual when understood as a narrative, dialogical, and participatory process rather than mere information transfer. The shared communicative mechanisms of the Gospel of Mark and *naton* indicate that oral forms of communication can support biblical proclamation without compromising scriptural authority. A parallel example is evident in the church-centric Bible translation initiative among the Seaman community of the Riau Archipelago, which similarly positions the local church and community as active participants in engaging Scripture within an oral, minority-language context.⁴¹ However, this implication remains conceptual and requires validation through future field research and dialogue with local communities before practical implementation.⁴²

⁴¹ Simanjuntak et al., "Church-Centric Bible Translation as a Model of Community Service in Seaman Communities."

⁴² Ferdinan Pasaribu and Benget Parningotan, "Mengatasi Gap Generasi Dalam Komunikasi Kristen: Pendekatan Yang Relevan Dan Kontekstual," *REAL DIDACHE: Journal of Christian Education* 5, no. 1 (March 30, 2025): 81–95, <https://ojs.sttrealbatam.ac.id/index.php/didache/article/view/639>.

In pastoral ministry, this study's findings affirm that faith formation takes place through a communicative process involving communal memory, dialogue, and communal participation. The dialogical pattern in Mark 8, as well as the exchange of speech in *natoni*, shows that identity and commitment of faith are built through the active engagement of participants. Liturgy, catechesis, and congregational accompaniment can therefore be developed as spaces of dialogue that sustain communal memory of faith, while remaining attentive to the cultural characteristics and needs of congregations in each local context.

For theological education, this study proposes an integration of textual literacy and oral literacy within the learning process. Competence in exegesis and textual analysis should be complemented by competence in speaking, listening, and communicating the biblical narrative contextually within oral culture. This approach is intended to produce church ministers who possess not only academic competence in interpreting Scripture but also the ability to communicate the Gospel message in ways that are relevant, critical, and responsible within the cultural context of the Timorese people and other oral communities.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that reading the Gospel of Mark through orality hermeneutics, operationalized through communal memory, speech event, and narrative performativity, reveals early Christian proclamation as an oral tradition that shaped theological meaning through communal communication. A comparative library-based analysis of ethnographic documentation on *natoni* identifies parallels with Mark at the level of communicative mechanisms, including formulaic framing, turn-taking, and social performativity, without implying shared content or historical relationship. Based on these findings, the study proposes a documentary-comparative model of orality hermeneutics for contextual dialogue between the biblical text and local oral traditions. Because the analysis relies exclusively on published ethnographic sources, the model should be regarded as a preliminary framework requiring further validation through field research.

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