

Managing Cultural and Language Differences: Ethnographic Study of NTT Congregation within HKBP Suprpto Church

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Abstract

In the context of the dominant Batak culture, HKBP Suprpto Church serves as a multicultural space that accommodates congregations from diverse backgrounds, including those from Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT). This study aims to explore the communication strategies employed by minority congregations to maintain their cultural identity while fostering social integration, using the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) by Howard Giles as a theoretical framework. Employing an ethnographic approach, data were collected through participatory observation and in-depth interviews during worship activities and social interactions within the church. The findings reveal that the NTT congregation engages in various forms of communication adaptation, including convergence, divergence, and identity maintenance, to strengthen social relationships without compromising their cultural heritage. The church functions as a social space that promotes cultural diversity and encourages intergroup harmony among congregations. This research addresses a gap in previous studies by providing insights into identity negotiation and communication dynamics in cross-cultural religious communities, offering implications for fostering inclusivity and social cohesion in multicultural religious settings.

Keywords: Etnografi; Gereja HKBP; Communication Accommodation Theory

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a rich country and has a variety of cultures and languages. Each cultural community in it has a distinctive identity that distinguishes one culture from another. Gusfield (1975) in McMillan & Chavis (1986) said that the word community has two main meanings. First, it relates to a place, such as a neighborhood, a small town, or a large city. Second, which emphasizes more about relationships between people, namely the quality of interaction and a sense of togetherness, without having to be tied to a specific location. However, in urban and cross-cultural contexts, these different communities often interact in the same space, creating a fairly complicated social dynamic. Churches that are social spaces, in addition to being places of worship, are often a place for individuals from various cultural backgrounds to meet, as seen in the *HKBP Suprpto Church*.

The *HKBP Church (Huria Kristen Batak Protestan)* is the largest Protestant church among the Batak community, even among Protestant churches in Indonesia (Situmorang et al., 2021). This Batak cultural identity is not only reflected in the form of worship, but also in terms of language, social values, and community practices that involve its congregations. Despite carrying a Batak identity, *HKBP* has now become a multicultural space with the presence of

congregations from various cultural backgrounds, including congregations from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), as happened at *HKBP Suprpto*, Cempaka Putih, Central Jakarta. The presence of the NTT congregation has created an interesting interaction dynamic where they bring different cultural and linguistic identities from the majority of congregations who come from the Batak ethnic background. A community will develop different ways and mechanisms in dealing with limitations and managing diversity (Chandra I. Lumban Gaol et al., 2022; Dinaloni & Muktiadji, 2022; Fathoni & Rohim, 2019; Fitrianto et al., 2023; Prasiasa & Widari, 2019). As a minority community, the NTT congregation at the *HKBP Suprpto Church* certainly faces various challenges. They are faced with a situation where they need to navigate their cultural identity in the midst of a dominating majority culture. In this sense, the church serves not only as a place of worship, but also as a social space where the dynamics of adaptation and negotiation of cultural identity take place.

The challenge in this cross-cultural interaction is not only related to social acceptance but also communication. Language, which is one of the main elements of culture, is an important aspect of interaction between individuals. The NTT congregation, which attends at *HKBP Suprpto*, which has its native language and cultural communication patterns, now has to adapt to the different language and communication styles of the Batak community. In this process, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) developed by Howard Giles is used to understand how the dynamics of cross-cultural communication take place.

CAT is used to predict and explain interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communication processes in various social contexts. This theory serves as the main framework for understanding the dynamics between interpersonal and intergroup features in intercultural encounters. The uniqueness of CAT lies in its ability to explain adjustments at the interpersonal and intergroup levels, by bridging micro and macro factors in explaining communication and its consequences (Azmah, 2017; Barlow et al., 2024; Elhami, 2020; Giles et al., 2023; Hoffman & Zhang, 2023; Simmons-Mackie, 2018).

The results of this research can make a real contribution to building more inclusive and harmonious relationships in multicultural spaces such as churches. The research also provides broader insights into how cultural identity can be maintained without creating conflict within diverse communities. In the context of a multicultural Indonesian society, the findings of this study can be a foothold for understanding and managing diversity as a valuable social asset.

The NTT congregation who worship at the *HKBP Suprpto Church* face challenges in managing differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds in daily life. Even though it is in a worship environment where the majority of the congregation comes from the Batak tribe, the NTT congregation still tries to maintain their social identity while adjusting to the dominant norms and culture that prevail in the church. Through CAT's perspective, this adaptation process is understood as a form of strategic accommodation that does not solely aim to equalize themselves, but also as an effort to build inclusive and respectful relationships, without having to sacrifice the social values and culture that have been attached to them. This research seeks to understand more deeply how the NTT *Jamaat* navigates the social space, managing cultural and linguistic differences through communication patterns that reflect the balance between adaptation and identity maintenance. Thus, the main question in this study is: How do the NTT

congregation that worship at *HKBP Suprpto* manage cultural and linguistic differences without losing their social identity?

This study aims to understand how the NTT congregation who worship at the *HKBP Suprpto Church* manages cultural and linguistic differences in the worship room dominated by Batak culture. The main focus is to explore their communication strategies and forms of adaptation in order to remain actively involved in the church community without having to erase or ignore their social and cultural identities.

A number of previous studies have explained the importance of intercultural communication in the process of adaptation of minority groups in different social environments. Lecky et al. (2020) showed that Papuan ethnic students from coastal groups adapt faster, but tend to lose aspects of their origin culture, while mountain groups are slower to adapt, but are able to maintain their identity. However, this study has not explored how social identity is built together in diversity. Meanwhile, Mahdiyyani et al. (2021) examined communication strategies between the Javanese and Kutai ethnicities, but emphasized more on the description of challenges without delving into the dynamics of social cohesion formed in the long term.

Psychological and linguistic barriers to the adaptation of Mainland Chinese students in Hong Kong, such as language anxiety and negative perceptions of other groups, do not address how social relationships are built in the context of the community (Wu et al., 2023). Meanwhile, a study by Bibi and Hamida (2024) examined the adaptation of international students in Indonesia through the CAT approach, which pays attention to the role of language adaptation and local cultural norms, although the focus is still limited to the educational context. Situmorang et al. (2021) make an important contribution to the role of the *HKBP Church* as a space for the preservation of Batak culture, but does not discuss interactions between congregations from different cultures.

From the entire study, it can be seen that there is a gap in the discussion of how cultural and linguistic differences are managed in a cross-cultural faith-based community, especially in terms of maintaining social identity without creating conflict or full assimilation. Much of the focus is still on the process of individual adaptation or the preservation of a single culture, without describing the complex dynamics of identity negotiation in a pluralistic community.

This study tries to fill this gap by analyzing how the NTT congregation at the *HKBP Suprpto Church*, which has historically been a worship space for the Batak community, manages cultural and linguistic differences through communication strategies. Using the CAT approach, this study not only explores forms of adaptation, but also maintenance strategies as an effort to maintain cultural identity. The focus on cross-cultural communities in religious spaces is a major novelty of this research, showing that social harmony can be built through inclusive and communicative symbolic negotiations.

The objective of this study is to analyze how the NTT congregation at *HKBP Suprpto Church* manages cultural and linguistic differences in a cross-cultural faith-based community, particularly through communication strategies that balance social integration and cultural identity preservation. By employing the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this research examines not only forms of adaptation, such as convergence and divergence, but also maintenance strategies that allow minority congregations to assert their cultural identity without creating conflict or full assimilation.

The study provides significant benefits by offering insights into identity negotiation in multicultural religious settings, demonstrating that social harmony can be fostered through inclusive, communicative, and symbolic interactions. These findings contribute to academic discourse on intercultural communication in religious spaces and offer practical guidance for faith-based organizations aiming to promote diversity, inclusion, and cohesion among congregations from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

METHOD

This research used an interpretive or constructivist paradigm within a qualitative approach. The study employed a qualitative method to explore how the NTT congregation adapted and managed cultural and linguistic differences in the predominantly Batak church environment of HKBP Suprpto. The interpretive approach focused on understanding the negotiation of cultural identity alongside the adaptation process in daily worship and social dynamics.

The study applied a communication ethnographic method to analyze the communication patterns of the NTT congregation at HKBP Suprpto Church. Ethnography involved participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation to capture cultural patterns and behaviors. In this study, three members of the NTT congregation were interviewed to explore their strategies for managing differences while maintaining social identity. The research also examined interactions between the NTT minority and the majority Batak congregation to provide insight into their adaptation process within a multicultural church setting.

Communication ethnography, as an interdisciplinary approach, helped to understand how the NTT congregation managed communication influenced by social and cultural contexts in intergroup interactions. This approach revealed the communication accommodation strategies they implemented to balance cultural identity maintenance and adaptation to the dominant Batak community.

The study adopted a realist ethnographic design, emphasizing objective descriptions of cultures and social groups through direct observation and informant accounts (Creswell, 2013; Van Maanen, 1988). This approach allowed for an in-depth depiction of the NTT congregation's life experiences, social dynamics, and challenges in a church environment dominated by Batak culture. The main focus was observing how the NTT members navigated their cultural identity and social interactions within the church community using empirical data from observations and interviews.

HKBP Suprpto Church was selected as the study site due to its geographical and sociological significance. Located in Cempaka Putih, Central Jakarta, an urban area known for ethnic and cultural diversity, the church represents a meeting space for various urban communities, including the dominant Batak and NTT congregations. The church's openness to cross-ethnic congregations, including those from NTT and Java, and its partial use of Indonesian in services created an inclusive atmosphere suitable for exploring cross-cultural communication dynamics, particularly through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

Resource persons for this study were identified through initial field observations, focusing on the 17.00 WIB service conducted in Indonesian. After observing the worship,

several NTT congregants were approached and agreed to participate in in-depth interviews to provide relevant and valid information.

Data collection combined participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participatory observation involved active engagement in church activities such as services and community gatherings, allowing for the observation of interactions between NTT congregants and the Batak majority, including nonverbal cues, language adaptation, and social dynamics. In-depth interviews explored personal experiences of the NTT members concerning cultural and linguistic differences, their challenges, perspectives, and adaptation strategies during worship. Documentation involved collecting written, audio, and video records relevant to the church's social and cultural life, including liturgical texts and publications reflecting cultural integration. The integration of these methods provided a comprehensive understanding of cross-cultural interactions in HKBP Suprpto Church.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Space and Rhythm of Worship

The HKBP Suprpto Church is a lively house of worship, where there are spiritual and social dynamics that go hand in hand. Physically, the HKBP Suprpto church building does not really emphasize traditional Batak elements that use traditional ornaments or Batak culture in every corner of the building. However, the physical appearance of the church that does not really highlight the Batak culture still creates a calm, familiar and solemn atmosphere. To support worship activities, adequate multimedia facilities are provided in the church such as screens on the front, in the middle right and left, to make it easier for the congregation to follow the liturgy, Bible reading, and congregational news that is being read. Sound systems such as loudspeakers, microphones for the Pastor and Sintua as liturgical bearers, as well as musical instruments such as piano, guitar, and even drums are also available to support worship activities. There are also meeting rooms or halls that can be used by the congregation to hold events outside of worship activities, such as traditional events such as weddings.

Life in this church is governed by the rhythm of worship that takes place four times a day. The four worship times are at 07.30 WIB, 10.00 WIB, 15.00 WIB, and 17.00 WIB. Each worship has its own differences and character. At the worship service at 07.30 WIB, the worship system used is Indonesian. Although worship at 07.30 WIB is a public worship, the congregation that worships at 07.30 WIB is dominated by parents of Sunday School Children (ASM) who worship at the same time but with separate segments and worship rooms. Furthermore, at the worship at 10.00 WIB, the worship system used is a special worship that uses the Batak language. The congregation at the worship service at 10.00 WIB is dominated by the elderly. In terms of music, worship at 07.30 WIB and 10.00 WIB still applies classical church music, namely by using Organ and Piano musical instruments. The songs performed are still based on classic hymn books such as *Kidung Jamaat* and *Buku Ende HKBP*.

Unlike the previous two services, the worship at 15.00 WIB is a special worship for pre-adolescents and adolescents which is usually dominated by young people and sidi students, with a worship system that uses Indonesian and a more contemporary liturgical performance. Meanwhile, the worship service at 17.00 WIB is a public service that uses Indonesian and is not dominated by certain ages or groups. In terms of music, worship at 15.00 WIB and 17.00 WIB is more modern with the target of young people. The musical instruments used already

use a complete band such as electric guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and saxophone. The songs used have also been mixed between the songs of the Song of the Church and the Buku Ende HKBP with modern worship songs guided by the Worship Leader to applaud and interact with each other. At the worship service at 17.00 WIB, many NTT congregations were met participating in worship at HKBP Suprpto.

Resource person 2: "There are three service sessions, so the morning church is Indonesian, the afternoon church is in Batak, and the afternoon church is in Indonesian. So I chose to join an Indonesian-speaking church, because if I joined there there there would be no obstacles."

Speaker 1: "If it's for how to sing there, if we're in the East, we sing normally. Now here we sing while applauding."

Based on observations, HKBP Suprpto can be said to be a social interaction space that brings together various cultural backgrounds. The congregation not only comes to pray, but also to socialize, share stories, and support each other.

Choosing HKBP Suprpto as a Place of Worship

The choice of the NTT congregation to worship at the HKBP Suprpto Church reflects a fairly diverse decision and is not fixated on one specific reason. As a nomadic community consisting mostly of civil servants, private employees, students, and other workers, they often face limitations in finding suitable places of worship in new environments. The proximity of the location is one of the main reasons that drive their choice.

Resource person 2: "... because the distance is close to the workplace"

The HKBP Suprpto Church, which is geographically strategic, provides easy access to worship, both from their residence and from their place of work or study. In addition, the existence of social networks around the church, such as housemates, family, or acquaintances, provides a sense of security and comfort.

Resource person 1: "So my employer when I was in Sumur Batu was a Batak. Yes, we go to church every week with my employer. We were there together."

Resource person 3: "... I worship sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the afternoon, because I have friends who go to church in the afternoon."

Recommendations from those closest to them are often an additional motivation, making them feel more confident to blend in an environment that may be new and unfamiliar to them. However, the decision to choose HKBP as a place of worship was influenced not only by its physical proximity, but also by the spiritual appeal and social comfort that this church offers.

Group Sitting Pattern

In worship practices at the HKBP Suprpto Church, the NTT congregation shows a seating pattern that reflects a unique social strategy to adapt in the midst of the majority community. Based on observations, they tend to sit in groups in the back or side seats of the church. This position was chosen not because of a sense of inferiority such as inferiority, as emphasized in interviews conducted with the three interviewees, but driven by reasons of practicality and comfort. The NTT congregation feels more free at the back, especially since they often come in small groups so that it allows for more intimate social interaction among their fellow believers without disturbing other congregations.

Resource person 1: "At the back, if the front is full, it means there are already many people, but at the back it is easy for us to enter the door directly to go there."

Clothing and Cultural Identity

In terms of clothing, the majority of the HKBP Suprpto congregation often use kebaya, a typical Batak songket woven fabric, either to be used as a skirt, shawl, or made as a men's suit. This strongly reflects the Batak cultural identity through the clothes used. Another thing that was encountered in the HKBP Suprpto congregation was an extra way of dressing up such as using hair-do such as a bun or hair that was slightly shaved. However, such a style of dress is more often found in mothers, fathers and the elderly. Such a way of dressing and dressing is rare in young people or those who are still teenagers. Unlike the majority of the HKBP Suprpto congregation, the NTT congregation does not use such clothing. From several observations made, the NTT congregation who also has typical fabrics from their regions was not found using typical clothes from their regions such as ikat weaving, buna weaving or sotis/lotis weaving. For men, they come with shirts or batik with cloth pants or jeans for men. For women, the NTT congregation uses blouses with skirts, or formal dresses and shoes. This style of dress hints at how the NTT congregation tries to appreciate the ethics of dressing to places of worship, where the HKBP congregation itself also always comes with the best clothes, even typical with Batak cultural attributes, namely batik or kebaya clothes with Batak songket.

Resource person 3: "If you are here, Batak people in traditional clothes often wear shawls, in NTT sometimes except for their parents, they wear shawls but not all. We just use the sheath to pray. If we are here to dress, yes, we dress, yes, we wear rich ones in Jakarta. To dress in rich traditional clothes according to the Batak people is not possible."

Language Differences in the Church

Apart from the style of dress, language is also an important aspect to see the process of cultural accommodation of the NTT congregation at the HKBP Suprpto Church. Language becomes a strategic form of how they blend without merging. The language in worship is entirely Indonesian and Batak, in accordance with the HKBP liturgy. Although the NTT congregation participates in worship that uses Indonesian, the NTT congregation often finds the use of Batak in Indonesian-based worship, such as the term "Horas", another Batak language that is sometimes inserted by the pastor during the sermon, or songs that use the Batak language. This caused confusion from the NTT congregation and gave rise to a "silent" attitude when it took place.

Resource person 1: "Now when singing, they use Batak. Well, the three of us discussed what language it is? Why don't we understand, right? We were confused, in the end we didn't sing. We just are... Even if we usually want to sing, we are confused about what language this is, we don't understand."

Speaker 2: "If you do Batak, sometimes it's in the lyrics of the song. We follow the lyrics of the song, because there is a text. But it also means that they don't really understand."

Although the use of the Batak language is often found during worship, it does not prevent the NTT congregation from worshipping. In socializing outside the formal worship space, the NTT congregation continues to build a close-knit small community. They gathered after

worship, talked in the local language, and shared stories with each other in an informal atmosphere. It is also often found that groups of NTT congregations take pictures together after worship.

Form of Participation of the NTT Congregation

In the liturgical dynamics at the HKBP Suprpto Church, the NTT congregation shows a pattern of active participation as a congregation, but does not take leading roles or be directly involved in groups such as participating in choirs or other activities. Their presence in worship is more participatory in general, where they follow the liturgical flow without taking on formal responsibilities in church activities. Based on observations, this does not reflect a lack of desire to get involved, but rather a form of their social awareness of the structure and norms of the church community, which is mostly derived from Batak culture.

Resource person 2: "For activities, only Sunday worship. Never get involved in any other activities again."

Speaker 3: "If it is not that far (participating in choir activities) it seems that I haven't lived there either, so I don't think I've even thought about it."

Coding Results of Interviews with 3 Sources

Table 1. Coding Table: Communication Strategy of the NTT Congregation

<i>Open Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>	<i>Selective Coding</i>
A. The Church as an active, dynamic, and interactive space B. The environment around the church is conducive C. The daily worship session is divided into several segments. The social functions of the church	The church as a dynamic worship space.	Adaptation and management of cultural and language differences of the NTT congregation in the worship of the HKBP Church.
A. There is no common reason behind B. Spiritual, practical, social and accessibility considerations C.	Variations of reasons for choosing the HKBP Suprpto Church for the place of worship of the NTT Congregation.	
A. The NTT congregation sits in groups in a certain area B. Facilitating social interaction among fellow NTTC Congregations. The choice of sitting position is not due to a sense of inferiority. D. Practicality and comfort are the reasons for choosing a sitting position	Adaptation strategy through the selection of places of worship.	
A. Compliance with worship norms through clothing B. The difference in Batak and NTTC	Clothing as a transcendental social symbol.	

<i>Open Coding</i>	<i>Axial Coding</i>	<i>Selective Coding</i>
cultural attributes. Clothing as an identity before God		
A. Indonesian as a means of accommodation B. One-way adaptation C. Flexible maintenance of NTT's cultural identity	Adaptation of language differences during worship.	
A. Solemnly following the liturgy B. Active participation in worship C. Not taking a formal role	Participated in active participation as a Congregation of HKBP Suprpto.	

Discussion

There are six main aspects observed in understanding how the NTT congregation adjusts to worship at HKBP Suprpto, which is predominantly Batak. These aspects include the meaning of the space and rhythm of worship, the reason for choosing the church, the sitting position, the way of dressing, the use of language, and participation in church activities. The adjustments made are conscious and aim to maintain mutual comfort without losing the identity of the NTT congregation. Thus, the congregation is able to adapt while maintaining their cultural characteristics through worship habits and daily interactions.

Space and Rhythm of Worship

In terms of space and rhythm of worship, the HKBP Suprpto Church is seen not only as a place to carry out spiritual obligations, but also as a common space that brings together various backgrounds. The NTT congregation interprets this space as a safe place to worship, as well as a social space to build relationships across communities. The choice to attend the worship service at 17.00 WIB which uses Indonesian and a more dynamic liturgy is a communication strategy that shows the form of a convergence strategy in CAT theory. This adjustment was made to minimize social distance with the majority community, especially in terms of the rhythm and atmosphere of worship. Adjustments only occur in the selection of worship schedules without changing their entire cultural identity as NTT congregations.

Choosing HKBP Suprpto as a Place of Worship

The decision to choose HKBP Suprpto as a place of worship was not only based on geographical proximity, but also because of the spiritual comfort and social relations that have been established in it. The participation of the NTT congregation in worship activities reflects the convergence strategy, where they adjust to the atmosphere and worship system that prevails in the church community. However, involvement that tends to be limited to non-liturgical activities, such as service or committees, indicates a maintenance strategy in maintaining their cultural identity. This is done not as a form of rejection, but as a safe boundary so that it can remain accepted without losing one's identity.

Group Sitting Pattern

The habit of the NTT congregation to sit in the back or side in groups shows a preference for comfort, easy access, and the desire to sit with people they know. Although they look separate, this pattern does not arise out of a sense of inferiority, but rather is part of the social adaptation strategy that they consider most comfortable. Within the framework of the CAT, this pattern is included in the divergence strategy, which is to maintain the typical interaction style of the original group without opposing or disrupting the prevailing social structure of the church. Sitting in groups becomes a form of non-verbal communication to stay connected internally within their community. This shows how the NTT congregation manages differences while still respecting the common space.

Clothing and Cultural Identity

The dress style of the NTT congregation that remains consistent with their identity, such as wearing shirts, cloth pants, and formal shoes without Batak attributes such as ulos, shows a form of maintenance in CAT theory. Although they look neat and respect the norms of worship, they do not necessarily follow the typical dress style of the majority community. The clothes here are a symbol of their attitude who still want to maintain the expression of the original culture in the common worship room. This election is not a form of resistance, but a way to maintain identity in a polite and inconspicuous manner. This strategy shows how the maintenance of identity can go hand in hand with respect for the dominant culture.

Language Differences in the Church

Language differences in worship rooms are also a challenge for the NTT congregation. They prefer to attend services in Indonesian and only passively follow the Batak liturgy. This strategy shows a form of divergence strategy, in which they do not fully adapt to the dominant language style, but still respect the prevailing structure. They do not use the native regional language in formal spaces, but maintain it in internal interactions. Thus, language selection becomes part of the strategy to maintain cultural identity while still allowing for engagement in shared worship.

Form of Participation of the NTT Congregation

In the context of participation, the NTT congregation actively participates in worship but chooses not to take formal roles such as committees or liturgical officers. This reflects a divergent strategy, as they choose to maintain engagement in spaces that are considered safe and do not stand out in the structure of the church. This attitude is a form of awareness of their position as a minority group that wants to remain accepted without going beyond the applicable cultural boundaries. They show respect for the majority community while maintaining their own social identity. This strategy shows how adaptation is done selectively to maintain a balance between engagement and identity maintenance.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine how the NTT Congregation at HKBP Suprpto Church, a multicultural worship space rooted in Batak tradition, manages cultural and linguistic differences while maintaining their social identity. Using an ethnographic approach and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the research identifies two main strategies:

convergence, demonstrated through inclusive liturgical language and respectful participation in Batak-majority worship, and divergence, reflected in communication patterns, dress, and seating choices that preserve cultural identity. The findings reveal that the NTT congregation successfully adapts without full assimilation, contributing to a diversity-friendly environment that values cultural differences. This study highlights the role of churches and multicultural religious institutions in fostering inclusive worship spaces and cross-cultural communication, and it suggests practical steps such as providing more worship sessions in Indonesian and promoting intercultural interactions beyond worship. For future research, comparative studies across churches or interfaith communities are recommended to identify best practices in managing ethnic and cultural diversity in religious settings, offering guidance for promoting tolerance, cohesion, and social harmony in Indonesia.

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Amanda Ibel Anzela, Almira Adani Rusman (2025)**

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Injurity - Interdisciplinary Journal and Humanity



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