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# Spiritual Mercy in Local Culture: Pena Neda as a Concrete Expression of the Catechism of the Catholic Church Article 1032

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Abstract

The Pena Neda tradition is a cultural heritage of the Lamaholot people practiced by Catholics at St. Paul Tanabelen Station as a form of reverence for ancestral spirits. This study aims to examine the spiritual and theological significance of the tradition in the light of Catholic faith, particularly referencing article 1032 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach, data were gathered through interviews with religious leaders, traditional elders, and local parishioners. The findings indicate that the tradition aligns with Church teachings on eternal life, the communion of saints, and the necessity of prayers for the departed. However, there remains a theological gap in the community's understanding and a limitation in pastoral outreach. Pena Neda has significant potential as a medium of faith inculturation, provided it is accompanied by appropriate catechesis and guidance. This research contributes to the development of contextual theology and pastoral praxis in multicultural settings.

Keywords: Pena Neda, Ancestral Spirits, Catholic Faith, Inculturation, Catechism of the Catholic Church.

## Introduction

Culture is the result of human activity that integrates intellectual dimensions and physical actions, producing meaning and symbolic expressions that shape social life. Within this perspective, culture is understood as a manifestation of human thought reflecting the value systems, beliefs, and collective identities of a community, as discussed in the context of inculturation within religious traditions (Ballano, 2020). As culture is transmitted across generations, it forms traditions that contain values and meanings which serve to maintain social continuity. One such form of tradition is the ritual honoring of ancestors, which remains alive within various indigenous and religious communities (Bego, 2022).

Amidst the currents of modernization and shifting values, the Lamaholot people particularly Catholics at St. Paul Tanabelen Station, continue to preserve the Pena Neda tradition as an expression of reverence for ancestral spirits, echoing the theological reflections seen in

local Catholic contexts (Jebadu et al., 2021). This tradition involves food offerings as a gesture of respect for ancestors, who are regarded as the founders of clans and sources of life. Descendants believe that ancestral spirits continue to exert spiritual influence over their lives, which is why the tradition is practiced collectively and repeatedly (Tiyo & Nampar, 2022).

This tradition is rooted in a religious belief in the existence of the spirit realm and the continuity of life after death, a view similarly found in comparative religious practices (Vîlciu, 2018). Awareness of this spiritual reality is expressed through ritual practices that are adapted to the local cultural context. During the Pena Neda ritual, prayers are offered with the hope that ancestral spirits may attain eternal happiness and divine mercy, reflecting Catholic theological interpretations of the afterlife (Gould, 2012). This belief corresponds with Catholic doctrine regarding the necessity of soul purification before one may fully enter into divine communion.

This teaching is affirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which states that praying for the dead is an ancient tradition of the Church grounded in scriptural testimony, as supported by early Church Fathers and theologians (Duffy, 1854). One biblical foundation is 2 Maccabees 12:45, where Judas Maccabeus offers a sin offering for the dead so that they might be released from their sins. From its earliest history, the Church has taught the importance of prayer, the Eucharist, and acts of charity for the salvation of the souls of the departed (Ikechukwu, 2018).

This conviction also rests on the concept of the communion of saints and eternal life as taught by the Catholic Church. Prayer for the dead becomes a spiritual means of maintaining the bond between the faithful on earth and those who have passed away, whether their salvation is assured or known only to God (Awaludin, 2019). In this context, the prayers offered during Pena Neda are not only cultural expressions but also profound acts of faith (Sorbeto, 2020).

In addition to serving as spiritual expressions, traditions also function as supports for the social structure of society. Among the Lamaholot people, Pena Neda is practiced collectively by clan members as an act of reverence toward ancestors believed to have entered Neda Kewokot, the spiritual realm, a practice that parallels second burial rites in other Indonesian traditions (Panda & Boy, 2023). Through this ritual, the community reestablishes a spiritual relationship with the ancestors in a sacred and respectful atmosphere.

The execution of Pena Neda follows a sequence of events and conditions passed down through generations. On the evening prior to the ceremony, the clan leader or *mehe mege*

performs *elo elut*, a summoning of the ancestors to inform them of the forthcoming offering. Symbolic acts such as placing betel nut on graves and reciting specific prayers are important elements of the ritual process (De Hoz, 2017). The presence of ancestral spirits is believed to be manifested through certain signs, including the condition of the internal organs of sacrificial animals.

The symbolic meaning embedded in this practice underscores the belief in the continuity of spiritual life after death. Offering food to the spirits signifies the ongoing familial bond that persists despite death. This practice reflects a worldview that emphasizes the enduring nature of spiritual relationships between the living and the dead.

Theologically, Pena Neda embodies a belief in the immortality of the soul and the transcendent relationship between the living and their ancestors. From the perspective of the Lamaholot community, ancestral spirits remain integral members of the family. Thus, every ritual action holds meaning only when grounded in the belief in life after death.

Beyond mere reverence, Pena Neda also functions as a means of petitioning the ancestors for various aspects of life, such as agricultural success, health, and protection from harm. The prayers and offerings involved are understood as forms of communication that uphold spiritual harmony between the human world and the spirit world. Consequently, Pena Neda serves a dual function: both spiritual and social.

Furthermore, Pena Neda encompasses an intercessory dimension, as it involves prayers for the salvation of the departed. This confirms that the prayers within the ritual are pleas for God's mercy and forgiveness for the souls, and also expressions of faith in the eternal joy promised to those who die in God’s love.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to explore the spiritual and theological significance of the Pena Neda tradition in light of the Catholic faith. The focus of the analysis is to uncover how a culturally rich local practice becomes a bridge between ancestral wisdom and Church teachings, and how the tradition strengthens the spiritual relationship between the faithful and their ancestors within the religious life of the Lamaholot community.

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to obtain an in-depth understanding of the religious practices of the faithful in the Pena Neda tradition. The research was conducted within the community of St. Paul Tanabelen Station, under the Parish of

St. Darius Riangpuho, Diocese of Larantuka. Data collection was carried out through interviews with religious figures, cultural leaders, and local parishioners, as well as through document analysis including catechetical texts, parish archives, and academic literature. Data analysis was conducted in four stages: data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings were then interpreted in relation to the teachings of the Catholic Church, particularly with reference to article 1032 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

**Research Findings**

The findings of this study summarize the practices and understanding of the faithful regarding the Pena Neda tradition, as drawn from interviews with various informants. Each aspect has been analyzed in relation to the teachings of the Catholic Church, with a particular focus on article 1032 of the Catechism. The following matrix provides a summary of these findings.

Table Summary Matrix of Research Findings

| *Aspect Studied* | *Main Findings* | *Data Sources (Informants)* | *Relation to Catholic Teaching* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Meaning of the Pena Neda Tradition | The ritual of offering food to ancestral spirits as an expression of reverence, love, and spiritual solidarity. | Cultural elders, lay parishioners | Consistent with the doctrine of the communion of saints and spiritual mercy for the souls of the dead. |
| Belief in Life After Death | The tradition reflects a belief that the soul continues to live in the spirit world and remains connected to the living. | Clergy, active parishioners | Aligns with the Catholic faith in eternal life and spiritual communion between the living and the deceased. |
| Symbol of Spiritual Suffering | The spirits are described as experiencing hunger and thirst as symbols of suffering, requiring assistance through offerings and prayers. | Cultural leaders, elderly community members | Corresponds with the teaching on purgatory (CCC 1032), where souls are purified before entering heaven and require prayer. |
| Forms of Spiritual Support | Food offerings in the ritual are considered a form of assistance for suffering souls. | Devout participants in the tradition | Represents an act of spiritual mercy, expressed in Catholic teaching through prayers and requiem Masses (CCC 1032). |
| Practice of Praying for the Dead | Catholic liturgical prayers such as requiem Masses and novenas are not yet common practice. | Community leaders, neighborhood figures | Indicates a gap between local practice and Church teaching, which emphasizes the importance of prayer for the dead. |
| Theological Understanding of the Faithful | Still limited; many associate prayers for the dead only with annual commemorations or All Souls' Day. | Parish priests, pastoral workers | Poses a pastoral challenge, as it does not yet reflect the need for ongoing prayer for souls in purgatory, as taught by the Church. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Role of Customary Rituals in Faith Practice | Pena Neda remains dominant in the religious consciousness of the community compared to formal Catholic prayers. | Cultural leaders, lay community | Demonstrates the need for an inculturated approach in which traditional values are illuminated by Church teaching without losing cultural identity. |
| Pastoral Limitations | A shortage of priests and lack of faith formation contribute to low theological understanding among the faithful. | Parish priests, small community leaders | Reflects structural challenges in delivering holistic and sustainable faith formation. |
| Local Community Initiatives | Some lay leaders are encouraging more regular and liturgical prayers for the dead. | Neighborhood heads, Catholic youth | Offers potential for building bridges between customary practices and Catholic faith through contextual catechesis and liturgy. |
| Relevance to the Catechism of the Catholic Church | The local tradition reflects themes parallel to CCC article 1032, concerning prayer and Eucharistic offerings for the dead to aid their purification and entry into eternal life. | All informants | Suggests that local practices may serve as a foundation for deepening Catholic faith within a cultural context. |

The matrix above indicates that the Pena Neda tradition contains spiritual values consistent with Catholic teaching. The explanation below expands upon each of the findings presented.

*The Meaning of the Pena Neda Tradition*

The Pena Neda tradition is understood by Catholic believers in St. Paul's Station, Tanabelen, as a ritual of reverence and affection for ancestral spirits. The act of offering food is regarded as an expression of spiritual solidarity between the living and the deceased. According to cultural leaders and lay parishioners, this practice is not merely a customary inheritance, but also an expression of faith embodied in symbolic form. It reflects the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints, in which the faithful on earth remain connected through love and prayer to those who have departed from this life.

*Belief in Life After Death*

The conviction that the human soul continues to exist after death serves as the foundation for the implementation of the Pena Neda tradition. Information from religious leaders and active parishioners reveals that they believe in the spiritual realm, where the souls of ancestors dwell and maintain a connection with the living. This belief aligns with the Catholic teaching on eternal life, which affirms that death is not an end, but rather a transition to a new life in the presence of God.

*Symbols of Spiritual Suffering*

Interviews with cultural figures and elderly members of the community reveal the belief that spirits who are not prayed for experience suffering, symbolized by hunger and thirst. These symbols emphasize the need for compassionate actions from living family members. Such interpretations correspond with the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, as outlined in articles 1032 of the Catechism, in which souls undergo purification through the prayers and sacrifices of the faithful before entering heaven.

*Forms of Spiritual Support*

Food offerings made during the Pena Neda ritual are believed to serve as spiritual assistance for suffering souls. Participants in the tradition hold that such acts carry genuine spiritual power and represent concrete expressions of compassion toward their ancestors. This belief corresponds with the Church's teaching on spiritual mercy, especially through prayers and Masses offered for the dead, as articulated in article 1032 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

*The Practice of Praying for the Dead*

Although the Catholic Church encourages regular prayer for the dead, including requiem Masses and novenas, field data indicate that such practices have not yet become part of the community's regular devotional life. Informants from among lay leaders and neighborhood coordinators noted that prayers for the dead are often limited to annual commemorations. This reveals a gap between local religious practice and the Church's formal teaching, which emphasizes the necessity of continuous prayer for the souls who have not yet been fully purified.

*Theological Understanding of the Faithful*

Theological understanding among many parishioners remains limited, particularly regarding the spiritual purpose of praying for the dead. Interviews with priests and pastoral ministers show that such prayers are often viewed as mere customary observances, rather than active spiritual assistance for souls in purgatory. In contrast, Catholic teaching asserts that the prayers of the faithful have real spiritual efficacy in the purification of souls. This highlights the need for expanded catechesis to deepen the faithful's understanding of their spiritual responsibilities.

*The Role of Customary Rituals in Religious Life*

Customary rituals such as Pena Neda occupy a central place in the religious consciousness of the community. Informants from cultural groups and lay members indicated that these rituals are performed more frequently than formal Catholic prayers. This trend suggests the urgent need for an inculturated approach that allows local customs to be informed by the light of Church teaching without compromising cultural identity. Through inculturation, a harmonious integration between faith and local culture may be achieved.

*Pastoral Limitations*

The findings also reveal limitations in pastoral care, particularly due to the shortage of priests and the lack of comprehensive faith formation programs. According to interviews with parish priests and community group coordinators, many believers in remote areas remain beyond the reach of consistent pastoral support. This lack of access contributes to low levels of understanding regarding the Church's teachings, especially on the doctrine of prayer for the dead. Structural improvements in pastoral outreach are needed to support holistic and sustained faith formation.

*Local Community Initiatives*

Amid these challenges, positive initiatives have emerged from the local community. Some neighborhood leaders and Catholic youth groups have begun encouraging more regular and liturgical prayers for the dead. They are attempting to integrate Catholic devotions, such as the Prayer for the Dead and the Holy Mass, into customary rituals. These efforts represent a promising step toward pastoral engagement and contextual catechesis that bridges traditional values with the Catholic faith.

*Relevance to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*

The entire set of practices and meanings found within the Pena Neda tradition reflects a notable correspondence with Catholic doctrine, particularly article 1032 of the Catechism. The Church teaches that the faithful can assist souls in purgatory through prayer and Eucharistic offerings, enabling them to be purified and enter eternal happiness. According to the informants, this local tradition may serve as a valuable entry point for enriching the community's understanding of Catholic faith, provided that theological and pastoral guidance is offered to ensure alignment with Church teachings.

## Discussion

The Pena Neda tradition holds profound spiritual significance for the Catholic faithful in St. Paul's Station, Tanabelen, as it functions as a means of preserving the relationship between the living and the deceased. As an expression of reverence for ancestral spirits, this ritual embodies the belief that death does not sever familial bonds, but instead transforms them into a spiritual dimension, a concept aligned with indigenous ritual practices in other Indonesian cultures (Sihombing, 2022). The use of symbols such as food and prayer serves to indicate that the connection remains both dynamic and sacred. In light of the Catholic faith, this practice may be viewed as a concrete manifestation of the communion of saints. As such, Pena Neda is not merely a cultural tradition, but also a participatory expression of belief in eternal life (Waterhouse, 2013).

This spiritual meaning is further strengthened by the community's firm belief in life after death. The faithful maintain that ancestral spirits continue to live in the spirit world and sustain spiritual ties with their families, reflecting the cultural and theological rationale for memorial practices (Yusof & Ramli, 2021). This view corresponds with the Church's teaching on eternal life, as articulated in the Catechism. For this reason, the tradition does not conflict with Catholic doctrine, but rather reflects an eschatological dimension embedded within the community's spiritual awareness. The existence of this spiritual relationship confirms that death is not regarded as the final boundary within the community of faith (Koko, 2020).

Furthermore, the symbols of suffering attributed to the souls expressed through hunger and thirst – illustrate the need for spiritual support from the living, a motif also evident in traditional Javanese-Christian funeral rituals (Purnomo, 2017). Spirits who are not remembered in prayer are believed to endure a state of affliction and require help. This interpretation resonates with the Church's doctrine on purgatory, as found in articles 1032 of the Catechism. These local symbols serve as a culturally meaningful way to affirm the necessity of compassionate action from the faithful on behalf of those who have died. Therefore, both cultural and theological dimensions are interwoven in the community's spiritual framework.

Such compassion is tangibly realized through food offerings made to the ancestors, which are understood by the faithful as spiritual aid to those in suffering, similar to how symbolic offerings are used in Islamic law theology as acts of spiritual compensation (Hakim & Long, 2021). These offerings are believed to alleviate the pain experienced by the spirits and hasten

their purification. This belief reveals a substantial parallel with the Church's teaching on prayers and Eucharistic offerings for souls who have not yet attained perfect holiness. Accordingly, the ritual may be interpreted as an inculturated form of spiritual mercy that enriches the devotional life of Catholic believers (Doyle, 2012).

Nonetheless, a disparity remains between local devotional practices and the official liturgical norms of the Church. Catholic prayers such as requiem Masses and novenas have yet to become part of the community's daily religious life. Prayers for the dead are typically offered only during annual memorial events. This situation highlights a weak internalization of the Church's teaching on the importance of sustained prayer for the souls in purgatory (Obeten, 2020). Consequently, there is a need for more comprehensive theological understanding so that the faithful may recognize the spiritual value of their actions beyond cultural obligations (Suwito et al., 2015).

This challenge becomes more evident when examining how well the community understands the theological implications of praying for the dead. Many parishioners still perceive such prayers merely as customary acts of remembrance rather than as spiritually effective support for souls undergoing purification, a pattern observed in African Christian-Muslim contexts as well (Akah et al., 2020). A lack of catechesis and pastoral accompaniment is one of the primary reasons for this limited understanding. In this context, the need for contextual theological catechesis becomes urgent to ensure that traditional rituals are not detached from Church doctrine, but are instead enriched by a deeper understanding of faith.

The prominence of customary rituals such as Pena Neda in daily religious life demonstrates the powerful influence of culture in shaping the spiritual consciousness of the people. This tradition is often practiced more frequently than formal Church prayers, as it is perceived to be more emotionally resonant and communally meaningful. Such a phenomenon should not be viewed as a threat to the Catholic faith, but rather as a call for pastoral approaches that are grounded in local culture. An inculturated approach that respects the community's symbolic structures enables a more harmonious integration between faith and culture (Alec, 2017).

However, this integration cannot be fully realized without adequate structural support. The shortage of clergy and the uneven distribution of faith formation programs pose significant barriers to pastoral ministry in this region. As a result, many believers in remote stations lack

access to consistent theological guidance. This limitation obstructs the process of inculturation, as it deprives the faithful of the resources needed to reflect on their traditions through the lens of Catholic teaching (Obeten, 2020). The Church must respond by developing community-based strategies and by strengthening the role of laypersons in delivering contextual religious education.

Amid these limitations, promising grassroots initiatives have emerged within the local community. Some neighborhood coordinators and Catholic youth leaders have begun introducing liturgical prayers into customary rituals, such as the Prayer for the Dead or the celebration of the Holy Mass. These efforts demonstrate that the integration of culture and faith is possible, provided there is shared understanding and commitment (Alec, 2017). The role of local communities in the inculturation process is vital, as they are the primary agents of both cultural continuity and spiritual transformation.

From a broader perspective, the practices associated with the Pena Neda tradition are deeply compatible with core elements of Catholic doctrine, particularly those outlined in Article 1032 of the Catechism. In terms of prayer, spiritual relationships, and acts of mercy, this tradition provides a foundation for the development of contextual forms of devotion. However, to prevent the possibility of theological confusion or syncretism, ongoing pastoral guidance is essential to help the faithful interpret their customs in light of authentic Catholic teaching. Such guidance is key to ensuring that local traditions enrich rather than obscure the faith (Alec, 2017).

This study affirms that Pena Neda holds significant potential as a source of theological reflection and as a tool for developing pastoral practice within the Lamaholot context. The tradition is not merely a cultural inheritance, but also a channel for faith expression and spiritual enrichment. Within the multicultural reality of the Church in Indonesia, inculturated practices such as this provide an effective response to the faithful's need to experience and live out their beliefs in culturally meaningful ways. The Church is thus called to welcome and nurture these expressions of faith as part of a living and dynamic religious heritage.

From this discussion, it may be asserted that Pena Neda serves as a strong bridge between ancestral wisdom and Catholic teaching. This tradition not only meets the spiritual longing for connection with the dead, but also opens a path toward a more authentic faith experience. To fully develop its potential, continued dialogue between theology, culture, and pastoral care is

required. Through inclusive and reflective engagement, the Church can embrace local cultural treasures as integral components of its living faith tradition.

**Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

This study was conducted within the specific context of the Catholic community at St. Paul Tanabelen Station, under the Parish of St. Darius Riangpuho in the Diocese of Larantuka. As such, the findings are contextual and cannot be generalized broadly. Data were obtained primarily through interviews and documentation, but did not include perspectives from younger generations, who are generally less involved in the Pena Neda tradition. Additionally, no comparative analysis was conducted with similar traditions in other Catholic communities. Future research is encouraged to expand the scope to include multiple locations and diverse age groups. Comparative and interdisciplinary studies, particularly those integrating theology, anthropology, and sociology, could enrich the understanding of how faith and culture interact within local ritual practices.

**Conclusion**

The Pena Neda tradition practiced by the Catholic community at St. Paul Tanabelen Station carries both spiritual and theological significance that aligns with the teachings of the Catholic Church, especially regarding prayers and spiritual mercy for the dead. Despite existing gaps between local customs and official liturgical practice, this tradition holds potential as a bridge between ancestral wisdom and ecclesial doctrine. Through contextually grounded pastoral approaches and appropriate catechesis, Pena Neda can become a meaningful form of inculturation that strengthens communal spirituality and enhances the Church's contextual theological framework.

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