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Revitalizing Faith Through Tradition: Theological Reflections on the Ne'i Wiste Tua Ritual at St. Francis Xavier Station, Tapobaran, Diocese of Larantuka

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Abstract

This study investigates the theological meaning of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual in the Catholic community of Tapobaran, Larantuka Diocese. Rooted in local tradition, the ritual functions as an inculturative bridge that unites cultural heritage with Christian spirituality, particularly in expressing gratitude and offering. Using a qualitative descriptive method involving observation, interviews, and documentation, the research explores the symbolic, theological, and spiritual values embedded in the ritual. The findings reveal that Ne'i Wiste Tua is perceived as a sacred space where faith and culture converge, allowing believers to experience a contextual form of thanksgiving and self-surrender to God. However, modern influences and a weakening theological understanding have led to a decline in the spiritual interpretation of the ritual among some community members. To address this, the study highlights the urgent need for contextual catechesis, intergenerational education, and collaborative pastoral efforts. Theologically, Ne'i Wiste Tua is not a remnant of ancestral worship but a liturgical expression of faith when understood through Catholic teaching. It remains a vital instrument of spiritual encounter, affirming both local identity and ecclesial belonging.

Keywords: Christian Theology, Gratitude, Inculturation, Local Ritual, Ne'i Wiste Tua, Offering.

Introduction

The advancement of science and technology in the postmodern era has brought significant shifts in human thinking. Society has become increasingly critical of various forms of social authority, including traditional customs and religion (Clements, 2020). Religion is no longer seen as the sole bearer of truth. Teachings, doctrines, and religious rituals are now subject to scrutiny (Park et al., 2022). Sacred values and teachings are no longer accepted uncritically, but are instead reconsidered in light of contemporary human life. Individuals whose faith lacks depth are easily shaken by waves of criticism and suspicion regarding religious heritage, which often leads to apathy toward both religious and customary practices (Büssing et al., 2021).

This phenomenon reveals a crisis of religious relevance in modern life (Moyaert, 2017). One reason for the diminished appeal of religion is the loss of a sense of the sacred. Scientific

culture has shaped human thinking to focus solely on the physical and material world (Ferenczi et al., 2021). Consequently, the spiritual dimension has faded from public consciousness. This calls for a theological reflection that does not dismiss scientific and social realities. Such an approach allows cultural values and traditional rituals to be interpreted contextually in alignment with the spirit of Christian faith (Ballano, 2020).

In this context, the relationship between faith and culture becomes increasingly important to examine (Gariba & Assenyoh, 2023). Faith and culture are inseparable and interrelated realities. Within the framework of inculturated theology, faith is manifested through local cultural expressions, including rituals practiced in society (You & Ji, 2023). One tangible form of the encounter between faith and culture can be seen in the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual practiced by the Catholic community in Tapobaran, Diocese of Larantuka. This ritual expresses gratitude to Lera Wulan Tana Ekan, although many community members are beginning to lose their understanding of its spiritual significance (Okigbo, 2021).

This issue is becoming more urgent as there is a growing tendency to view the ritual merely as an inherited tradition devoid of spiritual meaning. Changes over time, the influence of modernism, and weak theological understanding have led to the perception that the ritual serves merely as a cultural obligation rather than a spiritual vehicle. This reflects a disconnect between the living heritage of faith and the actual understanding of the community (Molo et al., 2023). However, the ritual holds deep spiritual richness that can connect individuals with God, others, and nature in profound ways.

Therefore, a theological exploration of the meaning of gratitude and offering within the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual is essential to deepen the community's understanding. The fundamental question underpinning this reflection is: How can the meaning of gratitude and offering in the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual be understood and enriched in the light of Christian faith? By addressing this question, the authors aim to offer a framework rooted in contextual theology and aligned with the community's spiritual values.

This study seeks to understand the spiritual meaning of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual and explore its relevance through the lens of Christian faith. Specifically, it aims to examine the theological values embedded in the ritual and how these values can be lived contextually by the community.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to understand the spiritual meaning of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual and examine its relevance within the Christian faith. This approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of the theological values contained in the ritual and how these values are contextualized by the community. Data were collected through direct observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted during the ritual to understand the sequence of events, symbols used, and community participation. Interviews were conducted with key informants, including traditional leaders, the Molan, and pastoral agents familiar with both local traditions and Church teachings. Documentation consisted of field notes, photographs, and relevant literature supporting an understanding of the ritual's context.

Data analysis was carried out interpretatively to identify the symbolic and spiritual meanings of the ritual and to examine the emerging theological values. This process was guided by the research objective of exploring the spiritual significance and theological implications of the ritual in the faith life of the community. Data credibility was ensured through triangulation, which involved comparing information from various sources and methods.

Research Findings

For the faithful at St. Francis Xavier Faith Community in Tapobaran, the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual serves as a cultural pathway to express gratitude to God. Although the ritual is rooted in local tradition, the spiritual values it embodies remain relevant for those who experience it in the light of faith. This practice functions as a bridge between divine grace and human response. The Tapobaran community perceives the ritual as a space that integrates faith and cultural identity into a harmonious whole. Most believers understand that offerings made during the ritual are not directed to ancestors but are presented to God, with ancestors serving as symbolic intermediaries.

Ritual symbols, such as the goat and palm wine offered with prayer, reflect the human desire to remain connected with the Divine. Through this ritual, the community is inwardly prepared to welcome God as the source of life, while strengthening their faith through a direct link between religious experience and daily life. Moreover, the ritual creates a contemplative space for reflecting on relationships with God, others, and the created world.

On the other hand, the findings reveal challenges in the community's spiritual understanding of the ritual. Some members have begun to see the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual not as an

expression of faith but as an outdated custom that has lost its meaning. Misconceptions even arise, viewing the ritual as a form of idolatry. The advancement of science and the dominance of modern logic have influenced this perception, leading to the questioning of previously strong spiritual meanings.

Nevertheless, amid this crisis of meaning, the study indicates an urgent need for comprehensive faith education. Such education is necessary not only to deepen understanding but also to integrate traditional ritual symbols with Church teachings in a contextual manner. Field findings show that individuals who have received accompaniment and faith formation possess a deeper comprehension of gratitude and offering as manifested in the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual.

Discussion

To understand the spiritual meaning of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual, it is essential to view it within the context of human spirituality, where gratitude and offering serve as expressions of relationship with God. A believer who recognizes life as a divine gift responds with concrete actions that reflect this relationship. In this sense, the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual articulates gratitude not merely as an internal disposition but as a meaningful liturgical and symbolic act, as emphasized by Dunnington (2022), who highlights the importance of gratitude in Christian theological understanding. Local religious practice reflects the dynamics of faith embedded within its cultural setting.

Furthermore, local traditions such as Ne'i Wiste Tua are not to be abandoned, but reinterpreted in the light of Christian faith. In this view, the ritual not only remembers the ancestors but also becomes a medium for proclaiming faith through cultural symbols, as Bargár (2021) explains regarding traditional rituals as valid forms of Christian worship. Inculturation enables the Christian faith to take root in local cultures without losing its essence. The belief that offerings in this ritual are presented to God through the ancestors shows a creative theological adaptation, as elaborated by Korada (2022) in the contextual interpretation model of inculturation. Christians in Eastern Indonesia often use ancestral symbols as a means to relate to God, not for ancestral worship.

The symbolic strength of this ritual is deeply embedded in the life context of the community. The goat and palm wine offered represent the community’s hard work and total self-surrender to God. In agrarian societies, rituals of thanksgiving carry deep meaning drawn from

daily lived experience, as seen in the study by Baan et al. (2022) on symbolic dimensions in indigenous ritual practice. Moreover, the ritual aligns with Eucharistic spirituality by cultivating humility, gratitude, and obedience, resonating with theories on ritual transition.

Contextual spirituality deepens faith by embedding theological meaning in tangible human experiences, as discussed by Kama and Klaasen (2023) in their study on identity formation through liturgical inculturation. Thus, the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual becomes a space for the convergence of faith, culture, and life. This perspective also emphasizes the ecological dimension of faith practice, where care for creation becomes an integral part of living spirituality, as shown by Wnuk (2023) in his analysis of spiritual experience and hope.

As theological reflection develops, awareness grows regarding the need to align the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual with Church liturgy without losing its original meaning. Such alignment affirms the ritual's potential as a means of faith inculturation, as noted by Duncan (2014), who stresses the necessity of adaptation and reflexivity in inculturation processes. The Gospel can permeate local culture without compromising the authenticity of the Christian message. However, modernization and secularization can erode the spiritual depth of traditional rituals, as highlighted by Nche et al. (2016) concerning challenges of inculturation in modern contexts. The dominance of rationalism has dulled human sensitivity to transcendent experiences.

Given these dynamics, it is important to cultivate a correct understanding of symbols so that the ritual is not misinterpreted as idolatry. Symbolic education within pastoral contexts and the use of symbols and rituals as pedagogical tools for deeper faith formation should be prioritized, as suggested by Aroney (2023) in his reflection on faith experience and spiritual transformation. A critical and reflective approach is more necessary than simple rejection of tradition. Without adequate reflection, rituals risk becoming mechanical and losing their spiritual depth.

To prevent this, collaboration among traditional communities, church leaders, and society is essential for preserving the theological meaning and function of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual. Such collaboration is vital because the ritual is not merely an inherited tradition but a space of encounter with God within a local cultural context. Rituals in Asia are not merely symbolic but spiritual expressions that allow believers to encounter the Divine in contextual ways, as underlined by Mugok and Chai (2018), who emphasize the importance of contextual integration

between faith and culture. Enlightened by Christ, the ritual becomes a path to deeper communion with God and strengthens communal solidarity.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

This study is limited in its geographic scope and participant involvement. Its focus on the Catholic community in Tapobaran does not fully represent the diversity of practices and meanings of the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual in other areas within the Diocese of Larantuka or among other Catholic communities in Eastern Indonesia. Furthermore, informant participation was dominated by traditional and pastoral leaders, with limited involvement from younger generations, who are crucial to ensuring the continuity of the ritual. This opens opportunities for future, more inclusive studies that involve youth and inter-community participation to gain a more holistic and dynamic understanding of the ritual.

Future research should therefore integrate participatory and reflective approaches to develop faith education models based on local rituals. As a result, findings will not only be descriptively reflective but can also support pastoral and liturgical renewal that resonates with the lived realities of the faithful and strengthens spiritual identity within the framework of an inculturated Catholic Church.

Conclusion

The Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual represents a tangible encounter between Christian faith and local culture, expressed through acts of gratitude and offering to God. This study affirms that the ritual holds profound spiritual meaning when interpreted theologically as part of the community’s faith life. Symbols such as the goat and palm wine are not merely traditional elements but liturgical means through which believers offer themselves to God, while reinforcing relationships with others and the natural world. The ritual reflects a living spirituality rooted in the daily experiences of the Catholic community in Tapobaran.

However, the ritual faces significant challenges from modernization and limited theological understanding, especially among younger generations. Therefore, it is essential to pursue contextual faith education, intergenerational dialogue, and collaboration between the Church and indigenous communities to preserve the ritual’s depth of meaning. When properly cultivated and accompanied, the Ne'i Wiste Tua ritual becomes not only a cultural heritage but also a contextual medium for faith proclamation and a sacred encounter that strengthens communion with God.

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