

Dialogue Between Practitioners of Catholicism and Biboki Traditional Religion (Atoni Pah Meto) Society Through Acculturation

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ABSTRACT

This research addresses the unique quality of Christ's presence among the Biboki people of West Timor. In this society, the traditional house (*rumah adat*) is the center of local groups' religious celebrations. By analyzing the traditional house, we can find symbols that are valuable in the indigenous religious ceremonies, which can ultimately be related to the placement of the cross of Christ and the statue of the Virgin Mary. This helps the Bibokinese recognize Christ as "the way, the truth and the life". I use four approaches to this research, namely: 1) dialogue and interviews with some Biboki's customary figures; 2) direct observation of religious practices that occur in the traditional house, as well as daily life practices in Biboki societies, 3) interviews with the local community, and 4) promoting the possibility of the presence of Christ in the traditional house, transforming and purifying local offerings.

Keywords – *Uis Neno*, Biboki, traditional house, dialogue, acculturation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this writing is to find answers to the following questions: firstly, what are the opportunities which can help people create interfaith dialogue between the Catholic Church and the local culture (Biboki)? Secondly, does the Church adequately acknowledge and appreciate the local Biboki culture? This paper also aims to establish a dialogue between the Catholic religion and the indigenous culture of the Biboki through the process of acculturation (an anthropological term describing the mutual influences between two cultures). The people of this region on the one hand are Catholics but still practice their traditional religion defined by animism and syncretism. Their tradition is definitively marked by the traditional house that serves as the center of their religious celebrations. Traditional houses are often regarded as the primary source of power of Biboki lives.

Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God who had been present before Abraham can be found in any religion and culture. Christ is the Alpha and Omega that has been present in the original religion of the Biboki society. The Biboki have known the Supreme power as the Almighty God called *UisNeno*. Therefore, it is necessary to find the right efforts to introduce and reinforce Christ's presence so that He can be better known and appreciated by the Biboki people. Most essential for dissemination is His teaching of God's Kingdom, namely: unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness, service, peace, joy, prosperity and justice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. ATONIPAHMETO

AtoniPahMeto means, “People of the dry land”. This name was used by Ormeling, Middelkop and Schulte.

Northolt to identify the group of people in West Timor Indonesia (Ormeling, 1955; Middelkop, 1963; Northolt, 1971:19). The people of this ethnic group maintain their own language called: *UabMeto* (Dawan). Ataupah was the local leader who designated the name *Orang Meto* for this ethnic group (Ataupah 2020: 1-10). The term “Dawan” has never been used by this ethnic group, as this name is used by Orang Meto to refer to their neighbors, namely the ethnic groups of Belu, Sabu and Rote. Largely for this reason, I prefer to use the name: *AtoniPahMeto* to refer to the group of people in West Timor, Indonesia.

B. THE ORIGINAL RELIGION OF ATONIPAHMETO

I apply religion in this paper as “a unique belief of a nation related to the Absolute (God) as the basis of their life, and that belief has not been influenced by the elements or ideas of others’ belief or other nations” (Subagya, 1979). Tylor gave another definition of religion as “believing in something spiritual... and that is the essence of every religion, namely believing that the spirits think, behave and have feelings like human beings” (Pals, 2018).

The *AtoniPahMeto* people have practiced indigenous religion for a long time. For them, the name that resembles God is *UisNeno*. The word *Uis* comes from the word *Usi* that means King. Meanwhile, the word “Neno” means sky or sun. Therefore, *UisNeno* means the King of Heaven or King of the Sun. Before we discuss the idea of God in this original religion, it is good to see their concept of life and their relation to the cosmos, as well as their relationships towards local spirits.

a. *The Belief System*

Traditional religion infuses the daily life experiences of the *AtoniMeto* society during happy and sad moments. Locals believe that there is a sacral power that protects them. Therefore, they praise *UisNeno* for protection and peace because their lives are always marked by struggles and challenges. The *AtoniPahMeto* people recognize the Supreme Power as sacred, holy, attractive, tremendous, frightening and something too high to attain. They assume that God dwells in heaven, and for this reason use the term King of Heaven. Several researchers such as Zondervan (1888), Kruyt (1923), Middelkoop (1960), Nordholt (1971), Fox (1977), Lechovic (1969), McWilliam (2002), Neonbasu (2005), Hegerdal (2012) etc use this word *UisNeno* to express the Supreme Being named God within this particular regional context.

This ethnic group believes that human life consists of two aspects, namely the soul (*Smanaf*) and the body (*Aof*) (Amfotis, 1994: 30). Each human being is a part of

nature (the cosmos). When someone dies, his soul will enter the sacred world and from there he can help the family members who are still alive in this world. The soul (*Smanaf*) is the force and the source of life that can be found in the liver (*Fuaka*) and in the blood (*Na'a*). The blood (*Na'a*) and the soul (*Smanaf*) have a good and inseparable relationship. Human beings feel the force of their souls when they feel the flow of the blood in his body (Nailopo, 1990: 53).

AtoniPahMeto people argue that the ones closest to *UisNeno* are the ancestors. Therefore, their ancestors are regarded as intermediaries, through whom *UisNeno* delivers His blessing. *AtoniPahMeto* people also believe that spirits have big impacts on their daily lives. The spirits stay in sacred places like in the forests, on the mountains, on the rocks, and on the beach. They name spirits according to their places of residence. For example, a water spirit is called *OeSmanaf*, whereas a sea spirit is called *TasiSmanaf*. There are two kinds of spirits i.e: good spirits that help human beings and bad spirits that provoke sickness and problems. When someone experiences a problem like a sickness, he will ask himself: "What is my fault?" The people always think to maintain positive relationships with local spirits by conducting regular rituals in the form of prayers and offerings (Amfotis, 1994: 33).

b. Traditional Rites

According to the worldview of the *AtoniPahMeto*, life is a gift of God and life is holy. Life is a process of searching for God. But in this dynamic of searching for God, there is always opposition from evil spirits. So human beings need to prevent the influences of bad spirits in their lives by conducting rituals that keep evil energy at bay.

Life-cycles are accompanied by rites and rituals. Their roles are to integrate human life into the holy world because life is a gift of God and life is meaningful. By performing rites, people believe that God is present in their lives as the principal guide. The rite has the role of constructing a harmonious life by considering the presence of incomprehensible holy forces.

Members of Biboki society practice some phases of rites (rites of passage) from the time of birth until death. The rite phases include birth, initiation, purification, cult inclusion, offering, marriage, and death. The places of the rite celebration are traditional houses, cemeteries, holy sources of wells or fountains for tribes and others places considered holy and powerful where they can meet the Almighty God. There are three important elements in the rites of the original religious celebration, namely prayer, the sacrifice of animals or objects and banquets. These rites and celebrations are facilitated by a ceremonial leader. The ceremonial leader is invariably well experienced in customs and traditions. His leadership is inherited from the ancestors and he maintains spiritual strength and social influence in society. He acts as an intermediary between the living and the dead. In general, the language used in the traditional ceremonies by these ceremonial leaders is poetic and it involves speaking in pairs called *Takanab*.

c. The Concept of God in the Traditional Religion of AtoniPahMeto.

The people of this ethnic group use two terms to refer to the Supreme Being, namely: *UisNeno* (The King of heaven) and *UisPah* (The king of the earth). These two names show us that God is absolute and mysterious. God is very far from us but He is also close to us. He is the basis of our existence and at the same time He is transcendent and immanent (Amfotis, 1994: 58-59). Locals believe in the Supreme, known as *UisNeno* (God of the sky). For them, *UisNeno* is too mysterious to be understood by human perceptions and language. His Being is beyond human thinking and human understanding. Because of the inability of language to express perfectly the essence of *UisNeno*, the AtoniPahMeto people use some approximate terms to experience the existence and the role of the Supreme Being.

Some of these attributes are: *AmaUisNeno – AinaUisNeno* (God Father and God Mother), *UisNenoMnanu – UisNeno Pala* (God, who is far and God, who is close), *UisNenoAhaot-Afatis* (God who take cares for us). *UisNenoApaot – Apafa, Atukus – Anonot* (God, who guides us). *UisNenoAmoet – Apakaet*(Creator). *UisNenoApinat – Aklaat* (God who is Light and mysterious) (Amfotis, 2020: 155-157). These terms show us that the essence and the existence of the Supreme Being does not mean that the Biboki are pantheistic. They want to tell us, by using such varied terms for the Supreme God, about his richness and mightiness. They want to tell us that the Supreme is beyond descriptions expressed in words.

The people of *AtoniPahMeto* believe in one God. Their religion is based in Monotheism. The use of several attributes to name the Supreme is influenced by the dualistic-cosmic concept. Regarding this concept, Schulte Nordholt has written the following: “*UisPah* is *UisNeno*’s pendant. They form a dual divinity, in which *UisNeno*’s Superiority is obvious. That is not to say that *UisPah* has emanated from *UisNeno*. They are two distinct entities, but are inseparable from each other – one cannot exist without the other” (Northolt, 1971: 145-146)

C. JESUS CHRIST AND OTHER RELIGIONS

a. Who Is Jesus Christ?

Speaking about Jesus Christ means that we must discuss what defines Christian identity. We must speak about what defines our faith. When we raise this question: *Who is Jesus Christ?* we will find many answers. It depends on the experience of each person, as Hans Kung says: “Many Spirits, many images of Christ” (Kung, 1978: 139). True practicing Christians will say that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, Messiah, Saviour, Redeemer, Founder of the Church (Kung, 1978: 139). Christians who do not practice their faith but remain peripherally involved in social activities will say that Jesus is a friend, a brother, a pioneer, a liberator, etc. (Kung, 1978: 139). Jesus Christ is Love, the meaning of Life, a moral guide, the reason of life and being, a role model for people who believe in Jesus Christ because of their personal efforts to establish a personal relationship without any connection to religious dogma: (Kung, 1978: 139).

Jesus is a man who comes from God. Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God as the total liberation of human beings from sin, sufferings, and death. Knitter P. wrote that “Jesus was Theocentric... Jesus’ original message was the Kingdom of God... Jesus’ Mission and person therefore, were profoundly kingdom-centered, which means God-centered.... Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, was the content of his prayer and his work” (Knitter, 1992: 173).

Leonardo Boff wrote: “God who reveals in and by Jesus is God made human. A human who emerges in and by Jesus is a human Divine” (Boff, 1983: 102). In His Words, his acts and finally in his death and resurrection we know that Jesus is a man from God. In Him we find that He is a unique revolutionary. In Him the mysteries of God and humans become one. In Him we find the real God and human, because “incarnation is the fullness of manifestation of God and human” (Boff, 1983: 102). By observing and analyzing His Words and His acts we see that His life is always for others. He sacrificed his life for others including his enemies (Mt. 5:43). “His existence is always ‘an existence for the others” (Boff, 1983: 102).

b. *Jesus Christ and Other Religions*

In the New Testament, we can find that Jesus opened the opportunity for people of other religions to believe in Him. He accepted the faith of the Jews and Pagans. It was clear in the faith of the soldier: “... In reality I have to say that I can’t find this kind of faith in Israel” (Mt. 8:10). We can also see a similar approach in the text concerning the good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30-37).

Before the Vatican Council II, the concept of “*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*” (There is no salvation outside the church) was an official refrain. After the Second Vatican Council, the Church became more open to other religions and even saw other belief systems as potential ways to salvation (Knitter, 1986: 130). Dupuis stated his opinion about the inclusive theory in the theology of religions and the presence of Jesus Christ in other religions by describing Jesus’s uniqueness as a mediator. Jesus was signed by the Holy Spirit because His presence is not limited by space and time (Dupuis, 1991: 857). Karl Rahner conceptualizes “The Anonymous Christians,” affirming that every religious tradition holds the potential for facilitating salvation in the manner of the mysterious presence of Christ.

D. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JESUS CHRIST AND ORIGINAL RELIGION

1) *Jesus Christ and UemLeu (Traditional House)*

The traditional house is a religious celebration center for *AtoniPahMeto* society. Traditional houses are seen as the sources of personal stability and power. All activities begin and are completed in traditional houses. According to Cunningham, *Ume* (Uem) refers to a “house” as the residential, economic and ritual unit forming the foundation of Atoni society (Cunningham, 1964: 35). Fox considers the house in relation to a

“named descent group,” and refers to the common ritual of the group as its *nono* (Fox, 1998:4). Neonbasu considers the house as “...a guard and cares for the origin of life... and a place to keep and to look after people... our standing base and our root” (Neonbasu, 2011: 230-231).

In traditional houses, significant symbols pertaining to ancestral belief facilitate balances of spiritual energy. In the middle of the traditional houses, for example, there are two great pillars, namely the female pole (*Ni Ainaf*) and the male pole (*Ni Monef*). The two pillars are central to the original religious ceremonies. In these pillars, people pray to praise God (*UisNeno*) and the ancestral spirits. On top of these pillars, they keep the remains of their ancestors, which they see as a means of communication with the ancestors. In front of the traditional houses, there is a protecting tree called Bahanne (*HauMonef*) which has three branches. The first branch is the sharpest one and symbolizes *UisNenoMnanu* (The Highest). The second branch represents *UisNeno Pala* (The Closer God), and the third branch represents *NituLeu* (ancestral spirits) (Amfotis, 2020: 215-217).

In a dialogue, we must always strive to respect the humanistic intentions extant in every religion. People may offer or advocate their beliefs but they should not impose them. According to Mgr. Anton Pain Ratu, SVD (The former Bishop of Atambua Diocese), “In a traditional house it might be better to build an altar between the two great pillars and on the altar we can place the cross. The altar will be the center of the ceremony, and the meeting place between the people and *UisNeno* and Jesus Christ as a mediator. They can also place the statue of Holy Mary, holy images and ancestral relics (*Aluk - Kabi*) around the walls of traditional houses” (Pain Ratu, 1988: 20-22). Therefore, *the AtoniPahMeto* people should maintain the original meaning of the holy pillars in the traditional houses, as this only enhances their conceptualization of the Christian faith.

2) Jesus Christ and Tlol (Offerings)

The offerings to *UisNeno* and *Nitu-Leu* are chosen animals: steers and or white pigs for *UisNeno*; red pigs for spirits; animals of any variety for the ancestors. People also offer betel nut, tobacco, alcohol or *sopi* and so on to local spirits. From the local point of view, Jesus Christ in this context is considered worthy of the most glorious offering and the only and unique mediator. However, upholders of local tradition are mistaken in thinking these blood offerings are necessary. God does not want humans to burn offerings for the remission of sins. What God wants from human beings is an open spirit and mind, faithfulness, and humble hearts for Christ. “You wanted no sacrifice or cereal offering, but you gave me an open ear, you did not ask for burnt offering or sacrifice for sin” (Psalm, 40:6).

The proclamation of Christ as God who does not desire animal sacrifice helps local people understand that God’s grace for human beings is free from the need to spill blood. Humans cannot buy God’s grace with the blood or meat of animal sacrifices.

God grants His grace freely to us. “This view might change the views of this people who are influenced by the principle of ‘Do ut des’ (Give and take) or the belief that in order to gain blessings people have to sacrifice something since they assume that God will grant grace abundantly to the person who offers the best sacrifice” (Amfotis, 1994: 139-140).

3) Jesus Christ and “Leu” (Magic Power)

AtoniPahMeto people have a close and intimate relationship with their ancestors because they believe that their ancestors can help them to have magic power considered ‘Leu’ (holy) (Amfotis, 1994:140). The concept of ‘Leu’ (holy) among the Baboki people is almost the same as the concept of holy according to E. Durkheim that is signed by the feeling of *Tremendum et Fascinosum* in relation to God and also his idea of holy (*Le Sacre*) in the primitive way of understanding the world in which invisible forces were controlled by magic power. He considers ‘holy’ the interdiction (*Tabu*) that is opposite to the profane (Vergote, 1987: 124). This is different from the conception of the German School about *Das Heilige* according to Rudolf Otto, who understood ‘Holy’ only in relation to the authority of God (Vergote, 1987: 125).

Jesus Christ can be proclaimed as the Liberator of the psychological fear of *Leu*, which is believed as holy and frightening. Jesus can be presented as an Excellent Mediator and unique Revealer of the Merciful God. Surely it is difficult to remove the fear that has firmly been planted in the human heart. However, by talking about Jesus Christ as the God who casts out evil spirits and demons, people might develop strong faith and belief in Jesus Christ as the Liberator, Protector and God who assures security, peace and prosperity in daily life.

The attempt to proclaim Christ as a liberator from psychological fear might be more influential to the younger generations in *AtoniPahMeto* society. We should present Christ as a benevolent and loving God rather than a terrifying God. Heritage objects of the ancestors should be seen as objects of memories and means of communication with them rather than as a source of magical power. We should try to avoid inherited explanations of traditional objects that frighten children.

4) Jesus Christ and *OeLeu* (Holy Fountain)

Every tribe has a holy fountain called *OeLeu*. The holy fountain is usually located in the forest or close to rocks. The fountain constantly and is regarded as the primary life source for the people of this tribe. Generally, the trees in this forest are forbidden from being chopped down by human beings because the forest is considered holy or sacred (Amfotis, 2020: 167).

By analyzing the role of the holy fountain as the source of life of the tribe, we can translate the role of Christ as the “fountain” of life for those who believe in Him. According to the local language of *UabMeto*, Christ is seen as *OemataHonis* (The Source of life) from which flows all good things, all well beings, all blessings for the people of

the tribe, especially for all those who believe in Him as the Savior and the Redeemer of all human beings. Therefore it is good to place a Cross on the *OeLeu* (Holy fountain) of the tribe because Christ is already considered their Redeemer. Christ is the source of life that brings all blessings to all human beings. He is the source that cleanses and satisfies all people by His role as *Logos* (Divine Word) who comes to redeem all humankind from sins and bring them to eternal life.

God's words provide the source of life because His words are the guide and inspiration for humankind to live well in justice, peace, joy and happiness in the world now and for eternity. The phrase "Christ as the Source of life" may be easily accepted by the local people because they have already known the role of water as the source of life. The local people will believe in Christ as the source of life, the source of blessings, holiness and salvation for all humankind. Even as a metaphor, the word: AIR (water) could be related to the Holy Trinity namely: "A" is Abba, Good Father, Creator of all things. "I" is Ictus, namely Christ, the Son of God, our Redeemer. "R" is the Holy Spirit, God who always accompanies us (Amfotis, 2020: 168).

From another perspective, water and God are the two 'things' that are most essential for human beings. If there is no water, there is no life. And it is the same with God; if there is no God, there is no life and no meaning in this world. Even though we have to accept that God is of course more than water because water is created by God. But water symbolizes the presence of God because of its extraordinary function as the source of life. Water can clean human beings from dirt. Water can bring us satisfaction, coolness and well-being. Water always adapts its form to its surroundings. Water is flexible and humble because it flows to lower places, though it can also flow to higher places if it carries exceptional power. Water is needed to sustain the environment because water can make the land become fertile. It nourishes the trees, quenches the thirst of the animals. But water can also destroy us if we are not careful. Water can cause floods.

5) *Jesus Christ and Afenu, Aleko (Traditional Healer or Medicine Man)*

In Baboki society, there are certain people who have special abilities and powers to help cure diseases. Their strength and abilities were obtained through prayer, asceticism, and spiritual cosmic power and even inherited from their ancestors. Usually the healers or medicine men use tree leaves or roots, fruits or certain grains that bring healing. Among them are candlenut, sour leaves and turmeric (Amfotis, 2020: 173) There are healers who rely on prayer alone called *Onen* or *Toes*. They try to pray to heal the sick. Their prayers are usually addressed to *UisNeno* by invoking the ancestral spirits (*NituSmanaf*). Healing like this has a huge psychological aspect on the sick. The sick are led to look back on his renewed harmony with themselves, with God, their fellow humans and with the cosmos. They rely on God as a master healer.

Jesus is a great and extraordinary Healer because only by his words the sick will be healed. He was considered as "Le medicine man par excellence et plus efficace de

toutes les médecines” (Peelman, 1992: 160). He healed blind persons, deaf and mutes, leprosy patients and many kinds of sicknesses. (Lk. 7: 18-23; Mt. 11: 2-6). The Word of God has extraordinary and special powers. Therefore, God can be called as *AlekoAfinit Ma AfenutAneset* which means Superior Healer.

6) Jesus Christ As a Unifying and Liberating Leader

Christ is not a divisive but rather a unifying God. He puts love and compassion first in all of His actions. He is also not selfish. He gives all of Himself and His life to others “because there is no greater love than the love of the surrenders that sacrifice themselves for their friends (John 15:13) “. He seeks to unite everyone in His Name. He came to the world to transform and liberate the people from poverty, diseases, sins, racism, hatred, egoism, etc and try to unite them in love, joy and peace in God (Boff, 1983: 238-239). Christ is universal. As a historical Jesus, He was bound by space and time. But as the risen Christ and the Son of God, Jesus is not bound by space and time. He is the universal Christ everywhere and in good form (Amfotis, 2020: 178).

7) Jesus Christ As Kulu (Teacher) and Amnasit (Custom Leader)

Jesus is *Ana Paku* which means “Lampholder”. He is the Holder of God’s light to illuminate the darkness of the world through the teachings of God. The Word of God is the light that will illuminate the world which is filled with deception and sin (Amfotis, 2020: 178).

In *AtoniPahMeto* society, customary leaders are almost the same as role models or teachers (kulu). Customary leaders have the authority to regulate and manage the customs. Customs serve a positive function as a unifier. It also has an educative role to train people to live according to the norms that enable a balanced life together with other members and living species of their society. Christ is a customary figure as a unifier and community developer. He, as a traditional leader, assists people to find a way out to free people from the pressures of society, to free people from the fear of the oppressing custom or of what is called *Leu* (Holy).

III. DISCUSSION

By analyzing the traditional houses, we can find symbols that are precious in the indigenous religious ceremonies which ultimately can be directed toward the strategic placements of the Cross of Christ and the statue of the Virgin Mary. This can help the Biboki community know Christ as “the way, the truth and the life”. Inculturation can allow Biboki societies to believe in Jesus Christ as the only son of *UisNeno*. The presence of Christ as the announcer of “Good News” is expected to bring liberation or purification within the indigenous religion. Intended practical measures for this objective include:

- 1) Conducting Dialogue with Some of Biboki’s Customary Figures.

- 2) Learning indigenous religious practices that appear in the traditional houses and also learning the lifestyles of Biboki communities by making observations in Biboki public spaces and by conducting interviews with local community members.
- 3) Promoting the installation of Christ images in traditional houses, purifying offerings with prayer, refining the healing rituals and communities' traditions, modifying healing rituals to avoid idolizations, and promoting Christ as a unifying figure and teacher.

IV. CONCLUSION

Continuous efforts to proclaim Christ and His teachings need to be encouraged so that the Christian teachings can truly enlighten, permeate, and purify this local culture that is still influenced by elements that are inconsistent with the teachings of the Christian faith. The local church is obliged to pursue a new pattern and style of preaching that really touches the culture of Baboki society so that faith in Christ and His teachings are truly accepted and lived out in daily life.

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