

## **Oral Traditions and The Christian Mission in East and West Timor: Tracing the post-modern Life**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the current objectives and observations of the Christian Mission working among the people of East and West Timor, Indonesia, and particularly missionary efforts to learn oral traditions which today inform locals how to navigate postmodern life and a post-truth society. It must be conceded that many people tend to disregard oral tradition. The most practical reason for this attitude is that oral tradition relies on mouth-to-mouth communication (without writing), as well as the absence of any legislation supporting the authority of this system of communication. This causes people to deem oral history testimonies as less “official” than written accounts. Although oral tradition is not often considered a reliable source for scholarship, one can use it to document local worldviews. Oral history can also be useful in drawing back the curtain to view an area’s history. This paper discusses the worldview of the Timorese people- both West and East - in the context of oral tradition in order not only to emphasize the unity of the people in West and East Timor, but also to highlight the bias of oral tradition: reframing it as a useful tool for understanding our postmodern and post-truth society. In this regard, the aim of the paper is to further discuss the significant role of oral tradition in the Timorese worldview and its usefulness for conservation and missionary attention.

I will frequently refer to the term “origins” to provide comparisons between the past and the current condition of postmodern and post-truth society. Better understanding of postmodernism and post-truth can help Timorese establish Christianity more centrally in local people’s daily affairs. In this way, I would like to discuss the subject of postmodern and post-truth society within the context of Timorese life and how biases on certain truths can be complicated by oral traditions. This paper is based on my research among the Biboki people of West Timor. The Biboki very often use oral tradition to trace their origins and root their philosophies of life informing their current lifestyles. Based on this research and also some material collected before (in East and West Timor), it is hoped that learning oral traditions can support current, locally-specific developments within this region of the country, especially those driven by theories of postmodernism and post-truth.

**Keywords: oral tradition, Christian mission, local belief, dialogue, post-modern, post truth society, humanity approach**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I will address four main features of Biboki society in this paper, namely (1) oral traditions, (2) missionary work, (3) local lifestyles in West Timor and Timor Leste of RDTL, and (4) postmodernism in practice. The key question is how can Timorese society be able to understand mission work in the midst of today's postmodern era?

As a part of my anthropological study, I traveled around Timor Island of Eastern Indonesia and Timor Leste of RDTL (Republica Democratica of Timor Leste) to collect dynamic oral traditions of local people and study the tenets of local lifestyles. Earlier missionaries of this area planted meaningful values within the hearts of ordinary people. Some of these are evident in oral traditions that maintain the Timorese worldview and the Timorese way of life. The term "origins" will be the typical term used to juxtapose past conditions with the current postmodern and post-truth society, and tracing this line of thought can help us better address how Christianity can increasingly be incorporated into local people's daily lives.

To what extent does the oral tradition mediate terms of peace and conflict for the people of Timor Island? How does it help them approach Christian traditions and the postmodernist life? What is certain is that the Timorese people have no difficulty in adapting to today's living situations. People of East and West Timor have different flags and abide by different national laws, but many Timorese who live near the border are blood related because of their ancestry. Many families on different sides of the national border share a traditional house and have the same cultural and ancestral heritage (Neonbasu, 2016: 269-270).

## **FORMING A HARMONIOUS SOCIETY**

Even though East and West Timorese have different flags, many Timorese people see themselves as inseparable from one another. Their de-facto separation is largely due to Portuguese and Dutch colonizers who arbitrarily instated geographic borders, and also due to post-colonial political choices by the Indonesian government. The impacts of the past before the arrival of the colonists has never been eradicated. Until now, the people of Timor, East and West, have never stopped maintaining a sense of unity despite belonging to different nations. Many say the flag may be different and the formal rules of the nations may be different, but their hearts are always bound by the unity of blood and thought. Partially for this reason, various rituals in Timorese culture are maintained: to preserve a historic sense of unity between the East and West.

Since 2016, my attention has been devoted to research on cultural relations between Nusantara (the Archipelago of Indonesia) and the Melanesians of the Pacific. This in-depth study of the relationship between East and West of Timor Island opened a window of understanding for me to probe further into the relationship between Indonesia and the Pacific countries. I conducted a toponymy, namely a study of both place names and ethnic names that shed light on how more research was needed

about people, landscapes, and landslides in this region (Neon Basu, 2016: 270; 2019: 40; 2021:106-107).

In this article, I would like to discuss the bias among Timorese towards conceptions of the postmodern and post-truth society. How can this bias be understood by analyzing local oral traditions? I draw data from the Biboki people of West Timor as a case study, analyzing how local people very often use oral tradition to trace their origins and at the same time find their understandings of life informing everyday actions. Leaning on this research and also some primary sources, I hope that by analyzing “oral traditions”, one can find ways to support current developments within the country, especially those mobilized by theories of postmodernism and post truth (Neonbasu, 2011: 24; 2013: 164).

This writing also offers an anthropological-theological deciphering of Jesus’ role as it inspires Timorese culture, particularly as it relates to the social life and mindsets of ordinary people within the island. Jesus’ role influences the local ecological perceptions of life. In this sense, this article shows Jesus’ act of solidarity with people makes him the world’s greatest anthropologist. Through the mystery of incarnation, the Word became flesh. The Divine Word Missionaries assigned in Timor have deeply reflected on this by adapting The Word to align with the local traditions of people. God’s word is now living and growing with three dioceses in the east domain of Timor: RDTL, (Archdiocese of Dili, Diocese of Baucau, and Maliana), and two in the west (Archdiocese of Kupang and Diocese of Atambua). From the SVD perspective, Timor Island is divided into the Timor Province and the newly established Region of Timor Leste.

## **THE INCARNATION: THE WORD BECAME MAN**

The SVD constitution No. 103 provides a basic anthropological discourse on Jesus’ role in the concrete history of humanity and is used as the main claim for a true anthropologist. Furthermore, the word ‘became man’ appears in the first sentence of the constitution, which suits the Timor Island circumstances in certain historic situations. According to the second sentence, Jesus proclaimed peace and salvation to the good, and showed more kindness to the poor, treating all with mercy and the pure love of God.

Without omitting the constitutional meaning of the mission of Christ and today’s church, this article also provides a strategic reflection on God’s incarnation according to classical theology in league with anthropology. This is the best way to understand more about the ordinary people of Timor Island: to establish a life in accordance with God’s will. Jesus never abandoned his humanity, and demonstrated this throughout the entire duration God lived as man and dwelt amongst the sinners. The Son of God never felt “above” the possibility of living with us.

In the context of human life, Jesus was completely human. According to Luke 2: 1-4, his coming was arranged in the dynamic condition of a person. This theological discourse places God in the frame of life in the domain of humans, and in a certain

space and time, including every aspect of humanity's need for true life. Jesus arrived in the world as a human, in a unique way beyond people's understanding.

The word became man, as Saint Paul described in his letter to the Philipians: "...Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are" (Phil. 2: 6-7). Despite being God, Jesus humbled himself and became man. People might view this act as a means to embrace weakness, yet without sin. According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus is shown as a poor person, possessing nothing, and surrounded by the poor. Furthermore, this spirit of poverty empowered him to serve the poor and live with them. To recognize God's intervention using human interpretation is difficult, and at best partial. Only faith helps the mind to know the mystery of the incarnation. Christ was born into a particular culture, but his actions were relevant to all nations and their cultures.

From a theological perspective, Jesus' meaningful presence of Logos in the social life of the people can be seen not only through his presence but also through His mission. The beginning of Jesus' presence was anthropological and demonstrated the unending love of God to the poor, respecting and caring for the orphans, the abandoned, and the suffering. In that way, an anthropological strategy was used to get to know the people and serve them without making any social speculations. Jesus' perspective of the world and the foundation of the mission derived from love and care for the poor, the *anawim*, and those abandoned. Furthermore, Christ wanted to bring those people to a new world and introduce a way of life in which God could be envisioned within. These people are cared for by offering a new perspective about struggles of the present, which can be overcome in the future with Faith. Jesus builds a kind of spirituality that embraces reality. Incarnation is based on dynamic focus on the people within their particular frames of history and culture. Moreover, the presence of Jesus in human history also allows him to integrate into people's culture. God actively learns the life and the development of the people and their culture.

The presence of Jesus in history gives new hope for establishing a proper understanding to find the positive values in relationships among people anywhere and anytime. Therefore, Christ respects universal values such as humility, struggle, openness, brotherhood, respect, forgiveness (not just criticism), hope, love, and commitment to struggle for a better life. These have been observed since the beginning of the Church. Furthermore, the testimony of Jesus and his disciples in the living Gospel becomes an example for the Good News for today's pluralistic society. In this way, the presence of our mission can be a noble outlet for Grace working towards a better, dynamic society. Missionaries and preachers represent the Good News to people and the culture of all nations.

According to Luke 1: 1-40, God became man in time and space of the ecological life of humans and entered into the cultures of all nations. Bethlehem and later Nazareth means locus and context where the Word comes from the throne and a human form.

Meanwhile, God did not preserve His perfection but came to live among weak men. In this form, God allowed himself to be the sacred paradigm of life and give new value to the reality of the people. Jesus brought a new perspective from above to everyday situations and into the heartbeats of all the ordinary people. Jesus then became the heartbeat of all the nations including their cultures.

God wants to give something meaningful to each human, the culture as a whole, and a new insight into the life and culture of the people. The habits of people are purified in the light of God's work and all these are directed for the sake of the world's salvation. In this way, people become co-workers of God in making a better world to live in. Considering this, Pernia said, "...We must approach the cultures and religions with deep respect". An important point to be highlighted is that to start proclaiming before listening and dialoguing is the wrong approach. In listening with a deep heart, the Kingdom of God's Love is proclaimed within a deep situation of the people. In today's mission, listen to others and also study more about their sacred traditions, their stories, and rituals, their cultural symbols, and worldviews.

## **THE TIMORESE PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORK OF SALVATION**

It might seem irrelevant to talk directly about Timorese perspectives on the work of salvation within the framework of the Bible. However, if one looks at the reality of human life and the people of the Timorese, the Bible's teachings are evident when they talk about welfare. Welfare for the Timorese is something that is real and very much attached to people's everyday lives. Normative values include living companionably with others, accepting one another as brothers and sisters, not holding grudges.

When rituals are held in a traditional house, prosperity is ensured by assembling various stories and anecdotes from the past. The stories presented relate to the very close relationship between the people of East Timor and West Timor. This cosmological unity is arranged in a spiritual manner to love and accept one another as brothers and sisters from one and the same island of Timor. Things like this actually make it very easy to proclaim the Good News of Salvation taught by the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Figure 1: The Origin of the people of Timor**

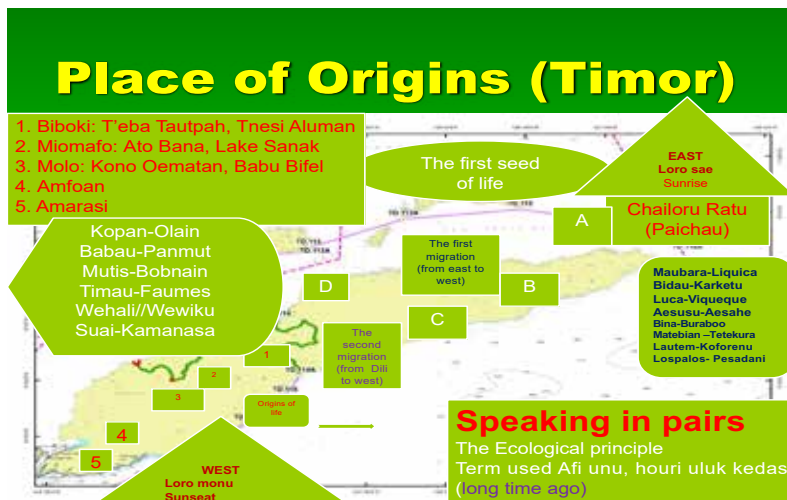


Figure 1 shows very clearly how fellow Timorese present stories of the same origin. Their common ancestors moved from the east, then slowly moved west; then some moved back to the east and migrations continued in an ongoing fashion. Here you can see the seeds of life that started from a clear source, then spread throughout the mainland of Timor into a variety of different locations. The table above shows that when people tell stories about the past, place names become very relevant. In addition, the names of the tribes, documented through topogeny, remain a highly relevant cultural unifier. Fox says, “topogenies thus merely provide a framework for the “placement” of more extended knowledge that can be called upon when necessary. Each place name offers the possibility for an elaboration of knowledge” (Fox, 1997: 13; see also McWilliam, 1997: 105; Neonbasu, 2016: 141).

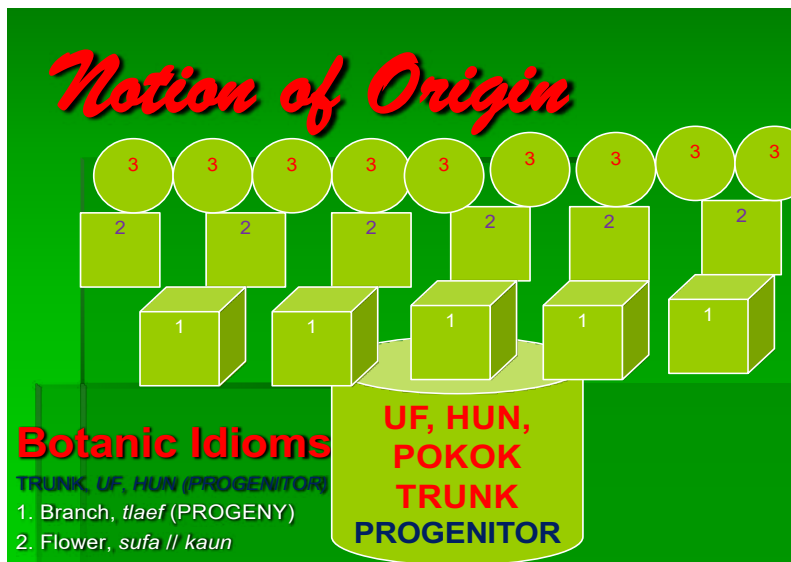
When entering the postmodern era, members of society still use stories to sow unity between them, which is precisely the same way the Church can foster unity and instill the Seed of Salvation in all hearts. Today’s so-called poststructuralism does not always prevent East and West Timorese from sitting together and recounting the same origins. In my opinion, this sense of unity offers the Catholic Church an opportunity to plant the seeds of salvation in the hearts and souls of the people of Timor. Changes and developments in the era have never separated Timorese people, even though they are citizens of different countries. The philosophy of today known as ‘post truth’ does not necessarily reduce the meaning and value of stories about the definitive origins of life. In the traditional houses, the Timorese hold hands, acknowledging the existence of similarities and fellowship while celebrating the treasures of life that have been received from God through the presence of ancestors and predecessors.

While researching in various places on the mainland of Timor Island, I myself entered traditional houses and witnessed firsthand how the Timorese celebrate life

by relying on the stories that they passed down for generations. It often happens that various conflicts between eastern and western communities from the same island resolve issues according to custom. When visitors or families enter traditional houses, traditional elders tell common origin narratives and close ceremonies by hugging those around them and shaking hands: signifying a clear message about the maintenance of mutual acceptance and peace.

In traditional houses, animals are offered according to ancestral rules and traditions. Elders tell stories from the past with the main aim of fostering brotherhood from the seeds of early life to all present. The stories of the past, generally referred to as the tree of life, often refer to terms of Uab Meto *uf*, (the trunk) the *tlaef* (branches or twigs) and *sufa ka'un* (flowers or fruit). Words like these point to important parts of a tree, and this means that life always flows from the trunk of the past until the present generation, as illustrated in figure two (McWilliam, 1997: 107; Neonbasu, 2016: 142).

Figure 2: Notion of Origins



Seen in the table above (2), the image of stories about origins is metaphorically painted with a tree. Such description refers to common Austronesian metaphors, that of the "path" with its "origin" to the botanic image of the growing and spreading "three" that extends from its base (Fox, 1997: 9). The plant principle (botanic idiom) is used by the Timorese to describe their origins to the present generation also and link them to future generations. On the basis of this tree image, people from the east and west always feel united because they have one and the same traditional house. There are many East Timorese who have traditional houses in West Timor, Indonesia, and conversely, there are also West Timorese in Indonesia who have traditional houses in Timor Leste.

## **MISSION WORK IN TIMOR: PAST AND TODAY**

Various writings and reports on mission work in Timor testify that current mission work is a continuation of the past. How beautiful were the footsteps of the predecessors. I have also written in *Verbum SVD* (2008 and 2010) regarding early missionary work in Timor, and several publications about my work in Indonesia. Thus, I do not repeat what I previously wrote about the Timor mission in the past.

The work of the Church in Timor maintains a very progressive climate for the work of the Salvation of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The mission fosters unity with local populations through enculturation which focuses on local traditions and culture, used as a means for translating the Message of Salvation. The church should be open to studying various local wisdoms, and the wonderful contributions from various disciplines and knowledge about the world and the rich cultural treasures of people and society. Pope Francis' very deep view of "Laudato Si" should encourage us to be open to various possibilities that provide positive impacts on human life and today's society.

Pope Francis has been very intelligent in opening the mindset of Catholics to respect the universe or the cosmos as a whole by giving respect to water, sea, forests, the horizon and the riches of the universe. The attitude of the Catholic Church must be deeper than that towards humans and society that have used reason and intellect, heart and feelings to produce something that, although in a post-modern and post-truth style, is always related to good and commendable human life.

That means that all products of today's humans and society which in the previous description mentioned that local community members are always still affected by various rituals in traditional houses, so in my opinion the Catholic Church should not underestimate the various ritualistic actions carried out by community members in the villages and interior areas of Timor Island, both West and East. Why? Because when entering the era of postmodernism or post structuralism and even post-truth, Timorese people use stories in the process of carrying out traditional house rituals.

Thus the Catholic Church must follow its founder Jesus Christ, who became human to die on the Cross. The Timorese Catholic Church must become like Christ, descending and walking with the people and communities they serve, also guiding them to adapt to the modern world while their thoughts remain rooted in various cultural points and past ancestral heritage. In the 1980s, Emeritus Bishop Anton Pain Ratu SVD started contextual pastoral work, which in Indonesia is called 3 BER, which stands for *BER-pendidikan* (being well educated), *BER-kedudukan* (holding a high position), and *BER-pengaruh* (being influential). In my opinion, this in the present context means the same thing: namely the pastoral style must prioritize postmodern identity and post-truth so that common behaviors of adherents can adapt to the qualifications of this era.

Once again, this means that the Church must open the windows and doors of its heart to learn about the various interpretations of "truth" that are around it in order to instill the Message of Salvation received from Jesus Christ. Around us there are many

sparks of truth, and the task of the Church is to gather all of them beneath the umbrella of Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **SEEING THE CROSS OF LIFE**

The following thoughts are taken from my paper published on the History of the Catholic Church on Timor Island (Neon Basu, 2013: 11-25; 230-255). Ecology and the study of natural life demand attention to living elements surrounding human life. The Timorese people view all ecological elements as sparks of various dimensions of human life which also support the two most fundamental elements in human beings. Without a good and orderly ecology, it is very difficult for humans to exist. Also, without good and regular ecological support, it is impossible for us to fully reflect on the human potential to live and grow in a better and dignified future.

From the perspective of religion and belief, symbolism about life, growth and fertility are fundamental dimensions for everyday human life. Patterns of thought and ways of behaving of humans (at present) personally or humans in a bond of togetherness, precisely point to the symbolism of various elements in ecological content. Therefore, human life cannot be reflected and studied apart from the special functions and roles they play at the ecological level. Ecology is a lens on the foundation of every effort of the human intellect to study and analyze human life.

The earth has always been viewed as a sacred mother, who from the very beginning has given life to every human child. Regarding this matter, there are various myths among indigenous people – including the Timorese people – that describe the intimate relationship between the sky god and the earth goddess. The culmination of such sacred stories seemingly reflect a common belief that (1) the sky nourishes the ground or earth with rainwater, and (2) the earth produces green grains and grass. The encounter between two different elements always brings new potential for life and development. In order to get a complete picture of the engineering of a harmonious encounter between two major earthly elements such as ‘sky’ and ‘earth’, we might employ two approaches: (a) symbolism and (b) mythology.

Symbolism and mythology enable a structural description of Timorese people’s encounter with ecology. The main theme that can be contemplated here is the symbolic way of thinking as a meta-relationship between humans and ecology or specifically the ‘sacred’. Two perspectives immediately visible are (1) The characteristics of most symbolism and mythology are structural in nature. In a sense, symbolism and mythology can be dissected through a study of the constructive elements that have formed them in a particular study pattern. (2) The processing of symbolism is an extension of the basic symbols and signs in human life every day. Additionally, old symbols and signs can always be renewed and explained by new symbols and signs that follow as a result of continuous reflection of one generation on the one previous.

It can be said that mythology and symbolism are structurally intertwined in ecological narratives, which inevitably inform human societies. Humans are the source

and culmination of created symbols and signs that exist intrinsically in the ecological circle of the physical world. Therefore, humans make up the microcosm and ecology might be called the macrocosm. Within every human society is an order that is narrated via symbolism and mythology addressing greater ecologies of life. In other words, human life and behavior flows into ecology or nature. The meaning of life will be easily visible to reflection and contemplation, if the same human being is able to see across boundaries, namely to see the larger picture of social interdependence between humans and natural/ecological systems.

People's unique associations, relationships and repetitions continuously lead to culturally-specific points of understanding. Association is closely related to the ability of the Timorese people to always explain something by relying on patterns of comparison of meaning on understanding other comparable aspects. Relationships occur dynamically and are focused on tendencies to provide explanations by associating one "natural" occurrence with another.

The stories, legends, traditional poems and models resulting from the reflections of the Timorese people illuminate three aspects of thought (association, relationship and repetition). These three aspects of language create a framework that can be seen in mythology and symbolism embedded in Timorese stories. What needs to be studied here is not only the framework or historicity of stories and legends but also creativity in the construction of symbols, myths, rites, systems, and stories connecting local Timorese to their origin narratives.

The Timorese people recognize sacred places as special locations to carry out actions that are dedicated to the holy or the divine. In these places, people express a very fundamental longing for harmony between humans and nature. Society yearns for permanence, a view of beauty and wholeness and perfection that is not entangled in various difficulties, problems and challenges encountered in modernity. Timorese longing indicates an empathic form of ecology, because it is inspired by the knowledge that everything that is good comes from an ecological source. In sacred places where human beings carry out rituals, facilitators evoke a harmonious reality of old: when the ancestors still lived in brotherhood within the framework of a productive ecological life.

## **DYNAMIC SOLIDARITY BETWEEN GOD AND MAN**

The temptation in the desert reveals the intimacy and fellowship of the Lord's relationship with the poor, the untouchables, and the marginalized. From different perspectives, Jesus resolutely refused to use his knowledge to gain worldly power, even as he was given the possibility to realize the power received from God. In this chapter of The Bible, Satan appeals to old belief structures, but the Lord unites his followers with a new paradigm of culture that promises a better atmosphere for humans. Christ generates new ways of understanding culture not only in ways that transform his followers' material attachments but also provide them spiritual security as well.

The test of Jesus by Satan in the desert, according to the Bible, reveals Jesus' presence among all the marginal groups, poor communities, and those not yet caught-up with modernism. These peoples are respected as they are. Jesus' respect for human traditions allows a possibility to facilitate all teachings on the power of God in ways relevant to people of all backgrounds. Jesus created the newest social order for alleviating the daily burden of the people and helping them refashion their lifestyles in a way that was spiritually liberating. He demonstrates in this passage of the bible the possibility for preachers and missionaries to persuade people of all lifestyles in the world to follow structures informed by traditions of their past that can be adapted to the will of God.

Let's return to Timorese society. The conditions are challenging because almost all the population has embraced Christianity (Catholicism called *kle mnasi*, "the Old Church" and the Protestant called *kle mnune*, "the Young church"). In the Catholic Church, there are four suffragan dioceses (Baucau, Dili, Maliana, and Atambua) and one Archdiocese (the archdiocese of Kupang). The paradigm of social life with the cultural background of the people of Timor within these dioceses is almost the same. While part of the same socio-political discourse, the first three dioceses (Baucau, Dili, and Maliana) are all part of the new state of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste, while the remaining two are part of the Republic of Indonesia (Atambua Diocese and the Archdiocese of Kupang).

The Catholic Church in Timor has created a new paradigm of theology that flows from the heartbeat of the ordinary people, including their perspectives on the establishment of better community-based lifestyles. Theology in the Timorese context has based its analysis on studies about the very simple and complex structures of ordinary society, which is autochthonous and intrinsic within the hearts of local inhabitants. The society of the Divine Word had encouraged all members worldwide to increase the missionary efforts of spreading the Good News through *dialogue*, which is an excellent medium for differing traditions to mutually engage without much misunderstanding. An important point is that *dialogue* means nothing without respecting others' viewpoints in regards to each cultural group's respective vision on ecology.

Theologically, *dialogue* is the best way to step into Jesus' tradition of respecting human life in a concrete context. In this sense, the Catholic Church in Timor Island must work harder to build new dialogue-based consciousness within the vocabularies and mindsets of local people. Timorese forms of communication are infused with proverbs, traditions and rituals, which also indicate the unique ways local people express their trust in God, the Almighty. One needs to look beyond what is said while performing rituals. In addition, concentrating on tracing the structural analysis of those rituals is also important. Timorese understand humans as an entity whose life is in essence a pilgrimage; one might call a person in the Timorese worldview a *homo viator*. This pilgrimage is directed by rituals and habits. This is an important cultural strategy used by local inhabitants to cover and understand the essence of God the Almighty

within the context of local discourse. In this regard, rituals are spiritual movements that include local people longing for God’s house. Also, it follows that rituals mark the appreciation of local people’s reflection on the Holy. Timorese have several ethics seen as the spiritual way of trusting the Holy, as illustrated below:

1. <i>Tabes ma ta uis tatuin Usi,</i>	<i>Greetings and honor to God</i>
2. <i>taaiti ma tasmusib neu Usi,</i>	<i>Lift and offer respectfully to God</i>
3. <i>tamnau ma tafnekan teubaha Usi,</i>	<i>Remembering and reminding God</i>
4. <i>tfe nekak ma ansaok neu Usi,</i>	<i>Give heart and sympathy to God</i>
5. <i>tabelak ma tahik hit matanik neu Usi</i>	<i>Place and keep our strength to God</i>
6. <i>fef bala ma hantaen es Usi</i>	<i>Uttering Mouth and giving messages by God</i>
7. <i>tofisa balan ma mepu balan es Usi</i>	<i>Place for wither and for work is in God</i>
8. <i>tfe ma ta’naat neuba Usi</i>	<i>Give and offer only to God</i>
9. <i>Usi es naaib ma nasoen lalan</i>	<i>God is the one who widens and clear ways</i>
10. <i>tji haeka ma ta’aiti nimka</i>	<i>Lift our feet and raise our hands</i>
11. <i>tok ma t’haek esaha Usi</i>	<i>Sit and stand up only for God</i>
12. <i>tok tabua ma tniuk ok oke</i>	<i>Sit together and assemble together</i>
13. <i>nbi hauba biana ma nbi fatba biana</i>	<i>On the other side of the tree and of the rock</i>
14. <i>nbi bat unu ma nbi bat muni</i>	<i>In early generation and later generation</i>
15. <i>sa’sa es Usi<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Everything is in God</i>

1 These fifteen phrases are also used as the way to express *various forms of precedence* of the ordinary Timorese, in terms of their linking to the current inhabitants both to the ancestors’ epoch and to the Holy providence. See for further discussion *We Seek Our Roots: Oral Traditional in Biboki*, 2011: 138-142

Most Catholics, including priests, misinterpret such phrases because they associate them with the word *tfua*, which means to follow the path of animism. Divine Word missionaries must take caution to respect the essence of rituals and traditions. Missionaries must harness a clear understanding of the current secular movement in the world to approach diverse spiritual expressions with tolerance, then additionally build a thorough understanding of what postmodernism says about bias. The key to Jesus' presence as a true anthropologist is that his entire life was based on God's will to reveal God's Love in the world. Following the Lord, the Catholic Church is present among the people not to extinguish a flickering wick, but to brighten it (Mt 12: 20).

## **THE HEARTBEAT OF TIMORESE CULTURE**

Timorese society has developed considerably, but it is a challenge to have more reflections on local people's viewpoints, including performing rituals and securing all the traditions. As a member of Institute Anthropos, a similar approach to the Anthropos is recommended: one that is

"... concern with the study of the cultures, languages, and religions of different groups of people... and try to research and present the cultural and social-psychological similarities and differences expressed by humankind, especially in the area of religion" (Piepke, 2005: 179-190)."

In the context of Timor Island, the Catholic Church and particularly Divine Word Missionaries must do more ethnographic fieldwork, not only to trace the traditional structure of local people's inheritances but also to trace the impacts of the modern and postmodern ideologies. Dialogue should incorporate diverse people and their cultures, different as they might seem from one another (Piepke, 2005: 194). This is in line with the thoughts of ethnologist Alexander Le Roy. The following is just a reformulation based on the Timor context "The Catholic missionary of Timor can also be a missionary of science. He can be and, in a real sense, must be. The Timor Church has to develop a work strategy which, above all else, includes the study and knowledge of the country and its inhabitants, the local customs, law, religions, languages" (Piepke, 2005:194). Considering this, Le Roy emphasizes the critical necessity for missionaries (to be read: Catholic Church) to know his layout in his place of work: "... One must explore, travel around; study and make comparisons .... The missionary must also, precisely because of his calling, know the geography of the place which he is evangelizing ..... he should study the condition of the area; he must try to get a sense of the population density, but also relative to any given place; he should study the relationships that bind one people with another, one tribe with another tribe, one family with another (Piepke, 2005: 195).

From my experience researching the Biboki people of West Timor (Indonesia), I consider Le Roy's work essential, as it provides a guide for reflection in reaching a higher paradigm for pastoral work among local people. According to Le Roy, as cited by Piepke,

“...the people were much more important than the physical features.” One must get to know the various groups: What is their history? Where did they come from? To which race, which family, to which group of people do they belong? What is their past? What are their customs? What habits and laws do they have? What is their specific mentality?” “Indeed, one must logically accept the fact that every group has its own way of understanding life, and must live it in a way that corresponds to their self-awareness, to make out of life what seems to them to be best. It is, therefore, necessary for the missionary to know the traditions and the laws of the country in which he lives. “As far as customs are concerned, the local people are completely convinced of their beliefs and devoted to their religious practices. A person must live like the people if he hopes to understand them. He must develop a rapport and understanding for their religious ways. ... Learning a language is a duty for a missionary” (Piepke, 2005: 195 - 196).

Among the ordinary Timorese, the simple mindset of local inhabitants and their daily efforts to help neighbors in living at peace with others is glorious to witness (Neonbasu, 2010: 395-421). Linking to such intellectual discourse, diving into the heartbeat of Timorese perception is required to analyze deeply how the Timorese perform all their activities based on what they’ve been taught through their ancestors’ cultural heritage. A local phrase reminds Timorese to “*tnao tatuinaha bei nai sin tusi ma sin nono, hele t’ao min ma t’ao leok*” which means, “go following the step of the ancestors’ order, to receive the blessing of good health.”

St Joseph Freinademetz, a renowned missionary, represents a great role model for today’s missionary work. Concerning this, Pernia offered an outstanding thought, “... Joseph came to China to give his life for dear Chinese, in such a way that, in the end, nothing remained. He expired” or “extinguished himself”-like a candle which gives the light in the dark and in the end, simply expires” (Pernia, 2010: 114-117). Since the earliest Timor mission, there was a strong commitment to base our entire mission in the spirit of God’s life and love through respecting humanity, their traditions, popular songs, riddles, word games, popular stories, myths, legends, common greetings, spontaneous exclamations, classic complaints, expression of grief, happiness, and disappointments. This also includes all sorts of archaic forms expressing the patterns and systems of daily social life (Neonbasu, 2010:416).

The spirit of internationality among the SVD must support efforts to learn more about the background of the ordinary people, their living conditions, needs, local veins of spiritual thinking and practices, and complex ways of life which closely link to ecological principles. This phenomenon is described in Timorese terminology as *mupene’ lek-leko hele nmui in human ma masan, tne’ tmafnekan tukam tuk ma tmamnaun panim paen* ( you should have a careful look [into the heart of any case. Therefore good objective results are gotten, and then both sides are reminded to exchange mutual care). Jesus told the story of God’s Kingdom only in parables, reminding us that parables are important guides for peoples’ sense of well-being and what is right and wrong. Parables are precious because they link to the heart of humans

(Kleden, 2010: 43-46). For this reason, failure to appreciate not only the parables, but also the habits, traditions, and cultures of indigenous people will result in the improper service for God's Kingdom.

The SVD Timor province should be optimistic that they facilitate reconciliation between God the Almighty and humanity. We should never lose sight of our context. This has been expressed by many SVDs, one of whom expresses the following: "... Human beings are part of a cosmic whole, and every human activity of eating and drinking, walking and talking, marrying and caring for a family, sowing, and harvesting, caring for the sick dying, has to be related to the universes to which we all belong and to the power, by whatever name it is known, which ruled the universe." (Poruthur, 2010: 118-134). This mirrors Le Roi's sentiments: "To be able to understand other religions and cultures, to be able to grasp other human experiences, one must always try to transcend one's bounded horizon. It is not easy to put down roots in a culture that is foreign to us. It requires time before one can feel at home there" (Piepke, 2005:197). Historical intentions behind missionary work should never be forgotten, as here we find purity in light of Words of God, and in Jesus, the Word becoming flesh: "...Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross... (Ph 2: 6-8)". Respecting others and the ecological atmosphere are the *conditio sine qua non* for the SVDs anywhere to navigate appropriate lifestyles as we spread the Good News in the present-day context.

## **CLOSING REMARKS**

Jesus frequently criticized Jewish customs and challenged the scribes and Pharisees. However, this does not mean Jesus condemned all aspects of Judaism. Therefore, negation of indigenous customs is inappropriate. Some examples of Jewish heritage include: firstly, the awareness and sense of pride as chosen people. They consider themselves as God's chosen nation and are loved by Him, while those who are non-Jewish are branded as infidels not knowing God. Jewish people are divided into two groups, namely the Jews and the Gentiles. Self-awareness is based on their ancestors' experiences passed down and written in their Scriptures, the fifth book of Moses. They will be a great nation according to the promise of Yahweh to Abraham (Gen. 12:3).

The Timorese church should follow the spirit of missionary anthropologists by boldly proclaiming true forgiveness and reconciliation without conditions. Timorese people and society are the pastoral field for the work of the Church. Therefore, oral traditions, with a wealth of stories, as well as various social behaviors of humans and society in a post-modern and post-truth climate of life, should also become an intelligent learning platform for the Church to proclaim the Good News of Salvation. The church must be open to study the various social behaviors of modern humans.

The Catholic Church must allow the mighty anthropologist to guide new and more human approaches and develop communities with seeds of love, prayer, faith, and generosity. At this time, the church should remain on the side of Timorese, particularly the marginalized who have long gone understood.

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